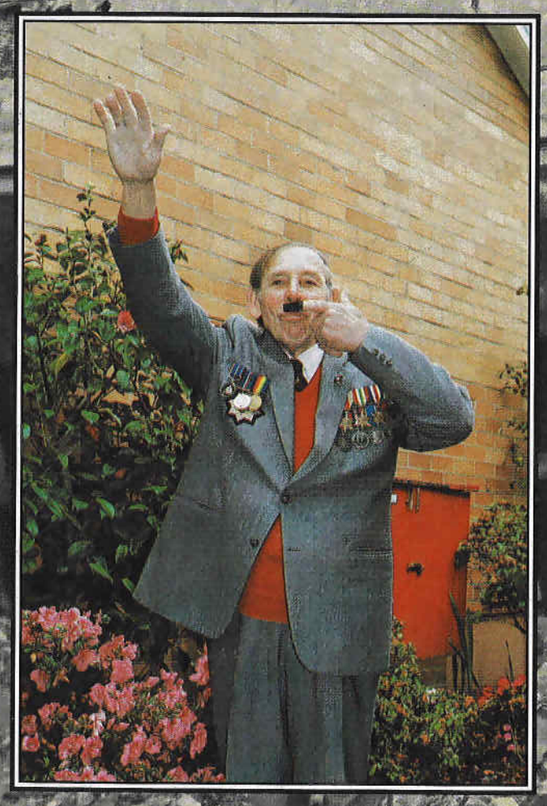

AFTER THE BATTLE

EAST-WEST LINK-UP

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CONTENTS

The US-Soviet Link-up 1
The British-Soviet Link-up 44

Front Cover: Although epitomising the link-up between East and West, this picture was staged the day after and not at the place where the first meeting between American and Soviet troops had taken place. (Allan Jackson)
Centre Pages: Allan Jackson took the picture on the fallen remains of the road bridge over the Elbe river at Torgau. The bridge had been blown by the Germans on April 25, 1945; 49 years later, they blew it up again. (Anthony Bethel)
Rear Cover: East meets West at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. Specially for *After the Battle* readers, Bob Russell, now resident in Australia, gives us again the salute he made 'in jest on the spur of the moment' from Hitler's balcony in May 1945. (David Green)

Acknowledgements:
The story of the US-Soviet link up is based in part on Charles B. MacDonald: *The Last Offensive* (Washington, 1973). Much additional information comes from Mark Scott and Semyon Krasilshchik: *Yanks met Reds* (Santa Barbara, 1988) and from the slightly-altered German edition, *Yanks treffen Rote* (Berlin, 1990). Karel Margry would like to thank the following for their help: in the United States: Allan Jackson, Doug McCabe, archivist of the Cornelius Ryan Collection at Ohio University, Dr Delbert E. Philpott, W.C. Sheavly of the 69th Infantry Division Association, Paul Staub; in Germany: Steffen Bothendorf, Manfred and Erdmute Bräunlich, Dorothea Körnig, Karl-Heinz Lange, Dr Uwe Niedersen of the Förderverein Europa-Begegnungen, Heinz Richter, Heinz Schöne, Hans-Eberhard Tischmann; and in the Netherlands: Peter Hendrikx and Andrei Poskakuchin.

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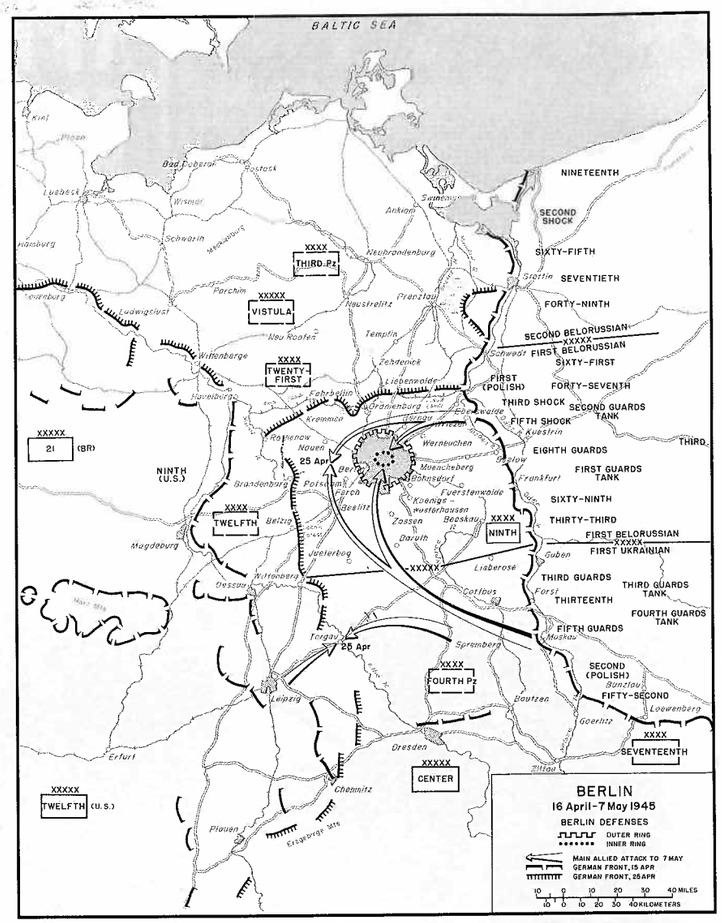


The Elbe link-ups took place on the same day the Soviet armies closed the ring around Berlin. After the Supreme Allied Commander, General Eisenhower, had decided to leave Berlin to the Russians, he halted his advancing armies on the line of the Elbe and Mulde rivers. The formations most likely to meet first were the armies of the US 12th Army Group and of the Russian 1st Ukrainian Front south of Berlin. By April 24, only a 20-mile gap remained between the US First Army on the Mulde and the Soviet Fifth Guards Army on the Elbe.

By the third week of April 1945, a fever of expectation had begun to grip both the western-Allied and Soviet armies that physical contact between East and West was imminent.

In the west, the US 12th Army Group of General Omar N. Bradley had reached a line only 75 miles from Berlin. On its left wing, Lieutenant General William H. Simpson's Ninth Army was on the Elbe river; the 83rd Division of that army's XIX Corps had established a bridgehead at Barby. In the centre, Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges' First Army was holding the Mulde, a tributary of the Elbe; the 69th Division and 2nd Division of its V Corps were holding bridgeheads east and south-east of Leipzig. Further south, Lieutenant General George S. Patton's Third Army was also on the Mulde; the 6th Armored and 76th Divisions had bridgeheads near Rochlitz, and the 87th and 89th Divisions west of Chemnitz.

On the Soviet side, the formation most likely to make the link-up was the Fifth Guards Army of Colonel-General Alexei Zhadov, part of Marshal Ivan Koniev's First Ukrainian Front. Having been directed due west while Koniev's main force attacked Berlin, it was advancing to the Elbe 30 to 40 kilometres a day. Although Zhadov had to transfer two of his corps to the left flank to stave of counter-attacks from the direction of Dresden, on April 23, the 34th Corps of Major-General Gleb Baklanov reached the upper Elbe — south of the US Ninth Army — along a 70-kilometre stretch: (from north to south) the 118th Division at Elster and Prettin, the 58th Division opposite Torgau and Strehla, and the 15th Division opposite Riesa. Next day, the 15th Division formed a bridgehead into Riesa; from Kreinitz, just north of Strehla, the 1st Cavalry Corps of Lieutenant-General Viktor Baranov was able to send out patrols into the area between the Elbe and Mulde rivers.

What would happen when Allied and Russian troops came together had worried the western Allies for a long time. Because of Russian suspicion and distrust of the Western Powers, creating a workable liaison machinery had so far proved impossible. With the war nearing its close, this situation had become potentially dangerous. As Allied and Russian troops devoid of liaison approached each other in fluid warfare, serious clashes might ensue, resulting not only in casualties but possibly in post-war recrimination.

THE US-SOVIET LINK-UP

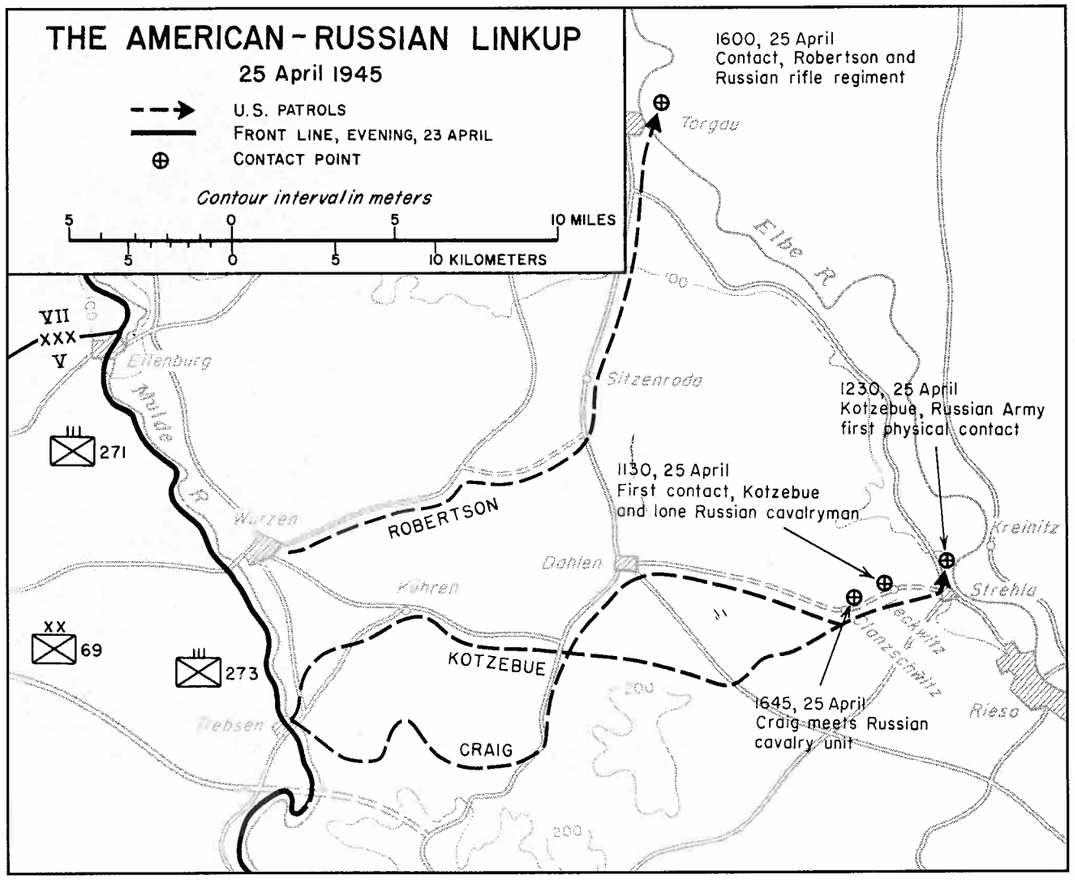
By Karel Margry

The demarcation lines of the future zones of occupation agreed on by the western Allies and the Soviets at the Yalta Conference clearly did not correspond with military requirements. In a series of exchanges lasting past mid-April, the Combined Chiefs-of-Staff, the Supreme Allied Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the Red Army's Chief-of-Staff, General Alexei Antonov, finally agreed that the armies from east and west were to continue to advance until contact was imminent or link-up achieved. At that point, adjustments might be made at the level of army group to deal with any remaining opposition while establishing a common boundary along some well-defined geographical feature.

At the same time, Eisenhower began to negotiate on recognition signals to forestall the possibility of Allied-Soviet clashes. Because of the language problem, identification by radio communication between the two converging armies was considered unreliable. At Eisenhower's request, General Antonov suggested as an over-all recognition signal red flares for Soviet troops, green flares for Allied. Eisenhower concurred. To a Russian proposal that Soviet tanks be identified by one white stripe round the turret, Allied tanks by two stripes, and that both place a white cross atop the turret, Eisenhower suggested instead that to avoid a delay in operations while putting on new markings, the Soviet troops be acquainted with existing Allied markings. The Russians agreed, and by April 21 identification arrangements were complete.

Eisenhower also proposed exchanging liaison officers, which the Russians neither refused nor encouraged, and asked the Russians for details of their operational plan while expanding on his own. Repeating the intent stated about a month earlier to stop his central forces on the Elbe-Mulde line, Eisenhower noted that the line could be changed to embrace upper reaches of the Elbe should the Russians want him to go as far as Dresden. His northern forces, he made clear, were to cross lower reaches of the Elbe and advance to the Baltic Sea, while forces in the south drove down into Austria.

Top: **Fifty years ago, on April 25, 1945, after having fought across half the globe to meet each other, the armies of East and West met on the Elbe in the heart of Germany, cutting in two the crumbling forces of the Third Reich. One day after the first contact, Americans and Russians walk arm-in-arm through the town of Torgau on the Elbe. Although Torgau has almost become synonymous with the US-Soviet link-up, it was not actually the place where contact was first made. (USNA)** *Above:* **Karel Margry discovered that US Signal Corps photographer Tech/4 Jack Cannon took his symbolic picture on Feldstrasse, today known as Elbe-Strasse. The river is just round the bend behind the soldiers, but the arrow on the left-hand façade pointing to a riverside garden cafe has now gone.**



The competition to be the first to contact the Russians was won by the US 69th Infantry Division. Although patrols were forbidden to go more than five miles beyond the Mulde, few could resist venturing out further into what was technically still enemy territory but in practice no man's land. Three separate patrols of the 69th Division's 273rd Infantry Regiment went as far as 20 miles to contact the Russians.

The Russians responded with unusual alacrity. Agreeing to the line of the Elbe-Mulde as a common stopping place, they noted that the Soviet armies, in addition to taking Berlin, intended to clear the east bank of the Elbe north and south of Berlin and most of Czechoslovakia, at least as far as the River Moldau, which runs through Prague.

Co-ordination with the Russians would come none too soon for commanders of units that were hourly anticipating contact. General Hodges of the First Army, for example, spent much of the morning of April 21 trying to get instructions from SHAEF on procedures to be followed, only to obtain little guidance other than to 'treat them nicely'. It was past midday when confirmation from the Russians on recognition signals arrived and word went out to subordinate units.

As finally determined, whoever made the first contact was to pass word up the chain of command immediately to SHAEF, meanwhile making arrangements for a meeting of senior American and Russian field commanders. To the frustration of the press corps, no news story was to be cleared until after simultaneous announcement of the event by the governments in Washington, London, and Moscow.

First word was that bridgeheads already established over the Elbe and the Mulde might be retained; but another message from the Russians early on the 24th changed that. Beginning at noon that day, the Russians revealed, they were to start an advance on Chemnitz by way of Dresden. During the advance, their air force would refrain from bombing or strafing west of the line of the Mulde as far south as Rochlitz, thence along the Rochlitz to Chemnitz railway, then to Prague. Eisenhower promptly ordered all bridgeheads across the Mulde withdrawn as far south as Rochlitz with only outposts to protect bridges and small patrols to make contact with the Russians remaining on the east bank. Patrols were to venture no more than five miles beyond the Mulde.

Meanwhile, excitement among First and Ninth Army units was mounting all along the line. Eager to go down in history as the unit that first established contact, divisions vied with each other in devising stratagems to assure the honour for themselves. Rumour piled upon rumour; one false report followed another. Russian radio traffic cutting in on American channels convinced almost everybody that contact was near. After pilots of tactical aircraft reported numerous (but erroneous) sightings of Russian columns east of the Elbe, almost all divisions sent their frail little artillery observation planes aloft for a look. There were few units that did not, in the meantime, violate the order on depth of patrols. One from the 104th Division, three men under 1st Lieutenant Harlan W. Shank, roamed more than 20 miles, reached the Elbe at Torgau late on April 23, and departed at noon on the 24th, having negotiated with various Germans but without having seen any Russians.

Through it all, the men along the line of the Mulde still had a war to fight after a fashion. On the 22nd, the 69th Division's 271st Infantry was still fighting hard to clear the town of Eilenburg, astride the Mulde. Meanwhile, every division had thousands of German soldiers, eager to surrender in small groups or in large, as well as hundreds of freed Allied prisoners-of-war and released foreign labourers pouring into their lines. At the same time, hordes of civilians, terrified of the Russians and hoping for refuge within American lines, gathered at bridges over the Mulde.

By the afternoon of April 24, nobody yet had any definite word of the Russians. Nor could anyone know that, contrary to the agreement with Eisenhower, Russian troops approaching that part of the Elbe which runs some 18 to 20 miles east of the Mulde were under orders to halt, not at the Mulde but at the Elbe. Word on the Mulde as a demarcation line had yet to pass down the Russian chain of command.

Frustrated by the prolonged wait, the commander of the 69th Division's 273rd Infantry, Colonel Charles M. Adams, in mid-afternoon of April 24 directed 1st Lieutenant Albert L. Kotzebue of Company G to lead a jeep-mounted patrol 'to contact the Russians'. In the days afterwards, Lieutenant Kotzebue was extensively interviewed by Captain William J. Fox, a combat historian of the 2nd Information and Historical Service attached to V Corps, and the resulting interview is worth quoting at length.

The patrol that was to make the very first contact was led by 21-year-old 1st Lieutenant Albert L. 'Buck' Kotzebue, a platoon commander in G Company of the 273rd Infantry. Born in Puerto Rico, both his father and stepfather were Regular Army colonels, and he had grown up at army posts throughout the United States and around the world. Having enlisted in November 1942, Kotzebue had attended the Anti-Aircraft Officer Cadet School at Camp Davis, North Carolina, as the quickest way to become an officer. As soon as he got his 2nd Lieutenant commission on September 1, 1943, he had volunteered to change to the infantry, being accepted on December 15. He had joined the 69th Division on September 12, 1944, arriving with it on the Continent on February 1, 1945. He had fought in the Remagen bridgehead in March, and taken part in the assault crossing of the Weser and the capture of Leipzig in early April. He had led 28 patrols in a space of only 30 days, so it was no wonder that his regimental commander picked him to lead the patrol that was to contact the Russians. This portrait picture was taken at Trebsen after his return from the link-up exploit and shows him characteristically smoking his pipe. (USNA)

THE KOTZEBUE PATROL

'At approximately 1600 on April 24, Captain George H. Caple, Jr, commanding G Company, telephoned the 3rd Platoon CP and told 1st Lieutenant Albert L. Kotzebue, the platoon leader, that he was to pick up six Jeeps from H Company, a radio Jeep and an interpreter at regimental headquarters, select 12 of his own men, as well as drivers, machine gunners, and a radio operator, and prepare to go on patrol east of the Mulde river immediately.

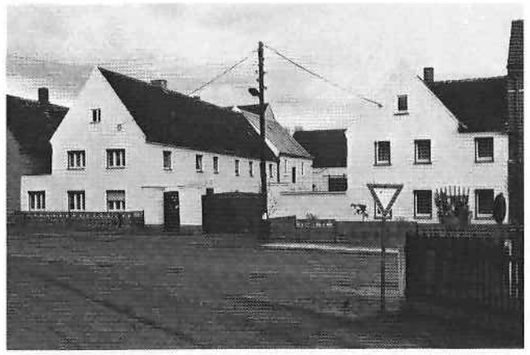
'The lieutenant gathered his men and machines and reported to battalion headquarters in Trebsen, where Major Frederick W. Craig, the executive officer, told him that his mission was "to contact the Russians". There had been frequent reports within the past week of the presence of Russian patrols in towns near the American front line along the river. The regimental commander was desirous of checking the authenticity of the reports. However, the regiment was confined to patrolling only as far as about five kilometres *[sic]* east of the Mulde. Thus, Kotzebue was instructed to patrol as far as Kühren in order to find out what was there and in between. He was to check on whether or not there were Russians or Germans present. If Germans, and they offered resistance, he was to withdraw without a fight; if Russians, he was to make contact and attempt to arrange a meeting as soon as possible between their commander and Colonel Charles M. Adams, the commander of the 273rd Infantry.

'Then he crossed the narrow bridge at Trebsen with his seven Jeeps and 35 men and checked in with the battalion CO, Lieutenant Colonel John M. Lynch, who was forward with F Company in Neichen, opposite Trebsen, and had the same orders repeated. He was definitely told to contact the Russians within his zone, if they could be found.

'Leaving the colonel at about 1630, the motorised patrol pushed north-eastward toward Kühren and Oelschütz, reaching as far as Burkartshain, where they met about 75 Germans who were absolutely without any fight left in them. These were quickly rounded up without trouble, disarmed, and started back towards Trebsen with instructions to stay on the road. At the same time, the patrol uncovered a hospital in the town, where American, British, Polish, French and other Allied wounded PoWs were being cared for. The men were too sick to be evacuated to the rear, but their enthusiasm was tremendous as they saw these first Americans to come to their rescue. Their emotion was great. Some cheered, some cried, they all smiled. They were freed. They were comforted, but the patrol had to go on.

'So, at about 1730, Kotzebue and his men pushed on towards their objective, Kühren. There were no incidents along the way, but, because there had been reports that there might be Germans in the little town, the lieutenant dismounted all his men, lined up the Jeeps with machine guns, and approached the town from the open fields to the west in an open skirmish formation supported by the machine guns on the Jeeps. They entered without a shot being fired and found the town filled with Germans, none of whom offered any resistance. The patrol quickly set to work rounding up the enemy soldiers, all of whom seemed desirous of surrendering, and, within a short time, there were 355 able-bodied prisoners as well as a very large group of German wounded scattered throughout the houses in the town. The prisoners were

Kotzebue also had a personal interest in the Russian people, one of his ancestors, the playwright August von Kotzebue, having been a court favourite of the Russian Empress Catharina the Great, and another Russian relative, the navigator Otto von Kotzebue, having discovered Kotzebue Sound off the north-west coast of Alaska. His pre-patrol briefing Kotzebue later described as 'very casual'. The 2nd Battalion Exec, Major Fred Craig, apparently ill-informed about the five-mile limit, told him to patrol 'about five kilometres to the east' saying 'If you see any Russians, let us know', but did not specifically tell him not to go beyond that. To Kotzebue it appeared that his orders gave him as much freedom as he needed. In the late afternoon of April 24, he set out with 35 men and a radio in seven Jeeps. The starting point of his patrol was the Mulde bridge at Trebsen, then a rickety wooden structure, today a narrow steel span.



At Kühren, still inside the five-mile zone, the patrol captured some 330 German soldiers. They were collected in a farm compound, the Americans themselves taking over three farmhouses as a base. The present owner of this farm, Herr Rülke, still owns the diary kept by his aunt which confirms that the Americans had breakfast in the family kitchen next morning.

While the others were busy with the prisoners, Kotzebue took two Jeeps and reconnoitred the road leading east to Deutsch-Luppa. Just inside the Wermsdorf forest, he came upon a lone house where he found a group of freed British PoWs who told him the Russians were on the Elbe and probably across at several places. The lone house is now a forest inn.

rounded up in the central square and herded into buildings within a farmhouse courtyard compound. All of them seemed anxious to remain American prisoners and asked frequently about the possibilities of being turned over to the advancing Russians. These questions were answered by placing them under guard with instructions that they were not to try to escape; so long as they didn't, they would remain in Allied hands; if they did try to get away, they were told that they would go to the Russians.

'This information was relayed to regiment by radio and, shortly afterwards, back came the word to scout the area in a five-kilometre *[sic]* radius of Kühren to contact either the Russians or the Germans. To accomplish this new mission, Kotzebue settled his men and the PoWs in the town and took off on a two-Jeep patrol in the direction of Deutsch-Luppa-Wendisch.

'Entering the north-western portion of the Forst Wermsdorf on the Deutsch-Luppa road, they came upon a lone house which contained about 15 freed British PoWs, who were, as usual, happy to see the Americans. These men had come from the east earlier in the day and the day before and knew the situation there fairly well. They said that there was nothing between the Russians and the Americans and that most of the German towns and soldiers in between simply were waiting for the arrival of the Americans. The freed Britishers said that they had reports that the Russians might be at Oschatz. They also heard that they were across the Elbe on the west bank at Strehla, and because they had received fire from the east when they were in that vicinity the day before, they said they knew they were across at Riesa. These were the usual stories, part fact, mostly rumour.

'The patrol then went on, continuing along the road to the east. Near the edge of the woods, they ran into three Germans who, at first, seemed to have some fight in them, but who surrendered after a few shots were fired. With this incident out of the way, they again took off, but only for a short distance, for again they came upon a body of German soldiers whom they saw along the road ahead of them. The patrol deployed, with the men advancing on foot and the machine guns on the Jeeps left to cover the enemy body. This column surrendered readily. It contained regular Wehrmacht troops and members of the Polizei who evinced considerable fear of the Russians. When they were disarmed, counted, and put on the road with instructions to report to the collecting point at Kühren, it was found that there were 28 of them.

'These incidents were small and were of no consequence save to slow down the reconnaissance somewhat. The patrol continued on to Deutsch-Luppa, passing en route small scattered knots of the usual American, British, French and Allied freed PoWs, who waved and shouted as they passed. But there was no time to stop for each group, for Kotzebue wanted to go as far as he could go before dark and return to Kühren.

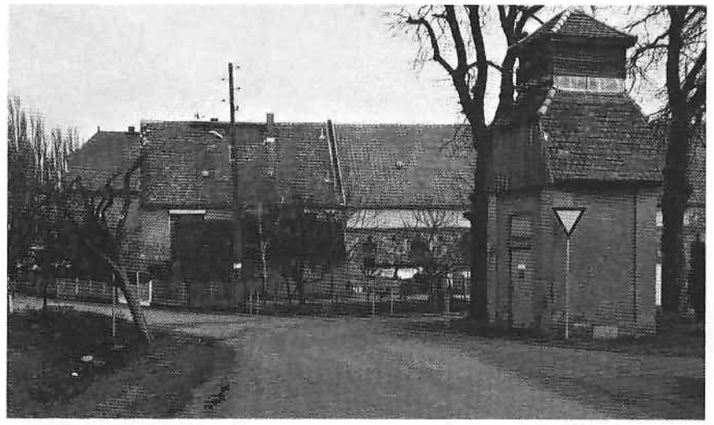
'When they reached Deutsch-Luppa, a German on a motor cycle came up and, obviously trying to wean favour with the Americans, told the patrol that a German officer was escaping to the north-east in a car. The two Jeeps immediately swung up to the north exit of the town, saw the German vehicle speeding away, and gave chase. Kotzebue could see the car as well as a motor cycle with two men on it which preceded the auto as both sped up the road to Dahlen. The chase that followed was like something from a Hollywood script. The Germans fled and the two Jeeps followed in a wild ride with the patrol's machine guns sputtering at the speeding enemy. At the railroad underpass just before Dahlen, there was a road-block through which the Germans sped, but at which the patrol slowed down to investigate, not wishing to take any chances on being knocked out by a hidden anti-tank gun or panzerfaust. This slight delay enabled the car and motor cycle to gain on the pursuers and, by the time they had cleared the railroad, the quarry had gone. The patrol followed at breakneck speed as far as the outskirts of Dahlen, when Kotzebue decided they had gone far enough, turned, and came back. The men were disappointed, for they were exhilarated by the chase.

'Since it then was growing late and dark, they roared down the road, headed for Kühren, but, as they approached Deutsch-Luppa from the north this time, they were fired upon from a haystack on the left near its northern outskirts by some scattered rifle shots. The Jeeps stopped and, within a few minutes, the men had flushed the enemy. These turned out to be a handful of krauts who had fired more in nervousness than in anger. Six PoWs were taken back to Kühren.

'The rest of the return trip was completed without event, the Jeeps racing at top speed. They arrived back at Kühren at about 2045, where final arrangements were made for the night.

'Regiment was notified through the Jeep's radio that the patrol had taken many PoWs, that all members were unharmed, and that they would be all right for the night, since they planned to remain in place until morning. Kotzebue received two messages late in the evening ordering the patrol to return by dark but, so he later maintained, this was impossible since the orders arrived when it already was dark. The rest of the night was quiet, as straggling Germans kept coming in to surrender, and a light guard was kept on the Jeeps and the prisoners already in the farmhouse compound.

The farthest point reached on the first day. Chasing a German staff car at full speed, Kotzebue's two Jeeps slowed down at this railway underpass just outside Dahlen, afraid they might run into an ambush. As it was already getting dark, he returned to Kühren and, despite orders to return to Trebsen, had his patrol hole up for the night.



Next morning, April 25, he started out east again with five Jeeps. (He left his radio Jeep, plus one other Jeep, at Kühren, ostensibly so that they could act as a relay station but, in reality, because he knew that without radio he could not be ordered back.) Two-and-a-half hours later, and some 15 miles further east, the patrol was heading for Strehla when it neared the crossroads hamlet of Leckwitz.

'On the morning of April 25, the captured Germans, all of whom were eager to co-operate, were organised into a march column of fours and were told to proceed along the road to Trebsen. In addition, there were about 50 wounded who wanted to be sent to the American lines, so they were instructed to go to Wurzen where there was a German hospital. They were all fearful and wanted American guarantees of protection since they said that the Russians did not abide by the Red Cross or anything else.

'All this was cleared up, everyone had breakfast of fresh eggs and bacon, prepared by the townspeople in the three houses which had been used for the night's bivouac, and the patrol of five Jeeps pushed off for the east at about 0900. Two Jeeps, including the radio, were left behind in order to maintain contact with regiment.

'(This group, in charge of Staff Sergeant Alfred E. Aronson, the platoon guide, remained in the area, continued to pick up PoWs, and tried to keep the civilian population in line. Throughout the period, they sent back to Trebsen over 1,000 prisoners without trouble. The townspeople were in terror and many of the women were in tears, as everyone asked: "Are the Russians coming here?")

'When he took off on the morning of the 25th, Kotzebue had no orders to go farther to the east. He went on his own, preferring to interpret broadly his original orders to "contact the Russians". He figured that since there appeared to be nothing between the American and Russian forces, if the many reports and rumours which had been picked up in the first part of the patrol could be believed, and since someone would ultimately take off and establish the contact, that he might as well do it. In addition, he had always had an intense interest in the Russian people and was anxious to see and fight side by side with their soldiers. Hence, his reasoning in continuing the move to the east.

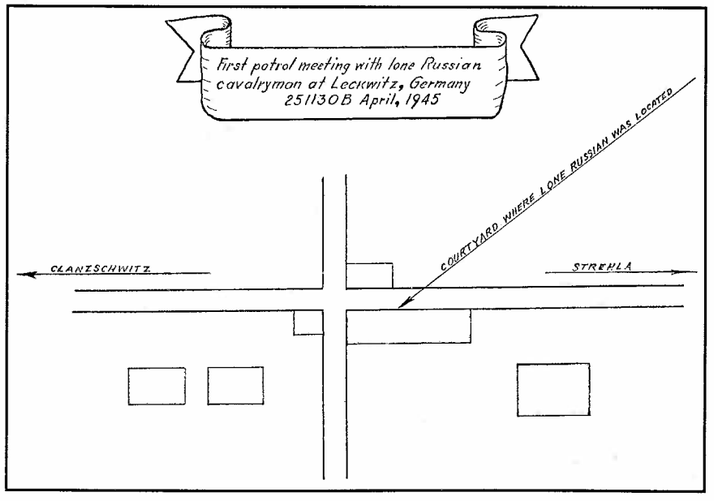
'The main portion of the patrol followed the same route as had the two-Jeep reconnaissance group the night before. On the way, they all stopped to talk with the 15 Britishers who had been met then. The stop was short, but the British soldiers were given some captured German rifles and they, in turn, gave Kotzebue a Union Jack. This was done because, based on their earlier experience of being fired upon by the Russians near the Elbe, Kotzebue wished he had an American flag or some other means of quick and easy identification when, as, and if he made contact. The British flag was the solution.

'After this short parley, the patrol took off and headed for Deutsch-Luppa. There, they were met by more freed Allied prisoners-of-war and knots of Germans, all of whom wondered why they had left the night before, obviously not realising that this was a small patrol and not the American army in force. Here, it was decided to swing north to Dahlen and go east from there, rather than go on straight out of Deutsch-Luppa, since they knew that there was an airfield and a German barracks capable of holding about 20,000 troops at Oschatz, directly on the way. It would have been foolhardy to go into this area with the few facts and many rumours about its strength and defences which were available.

'The swing to Dahlen was made without event, but on the outskirts of the village they overtook a couple of German cars, one being towed by the other, and containing several German soldiers. When questioned, these men said that they had only the couple of rifles which were visible through the car windows, but, when the vehicles were searched, they turned up a veritable arsenal. They found five rifles, one sub-machine gun, two panzerfausts, a number of hand-grenades, and lots of ammunition. The weapons were destroyed, the panzerfausts exploded, the ammunition loaded aboard the Jeeps, and the Germans sent to the rear with a stern warning, as the patrol again continued on its way. It was then about 1030.

'They went into Dahlen where they picked up several more PoWs as they threaded their way through its streets. While scouting through the village, one part of the patrol suddenly came upon a German column coming out of a side street. The Germans, who were towing a heavy machine gun on a cart, were caught flat-footed, since they were under the noses of the Jeep's machine guns. One started to run, was fired at, changed his mind, and all the rest surrendered. They were relieved of the machine gun, about eight panzerfausts, scores of hand-grenades, the usual small arms, and five belts of machine gun ammunition. There were 31 prisoners, all of whom were very young and scared to death. The action had caused a crowd to gather and there was the same crying and questioning about the Russians as before.

'Out of the crowd stepped a couple of Germans, middle-aged and obviously trying to make an impression, who said they could show the patrol the short road to Strehla. They were placed on the hoods of the Jeeps and, with the Germans riding along, the party took off, heading through Lampertswalde, and across a series of secondary roads, until they swung into the tiny settlement of Leckwitz. As they moved up the single main street, they saw a lone horseman several hundred yards away, but he turned into a courtyard, out of view, before they could definitely identify him. He looked strange. Everyone's heart beat faster. Was this it? The Jeeps spun up to the entrance of the yard and, there, among a motley crowd of displaced persons and wanderers, was a Russian soldier. The time was 1130. This was the first contact between the American and Russian armies.


first patrol meeting with lone Russian cavalryman at Leckwitz, Germany
251130B April, 1945
COURTYARD WHERE LONE RUSSIAN WAS LOCATED
GLANZSCHWITZ
STREHLA

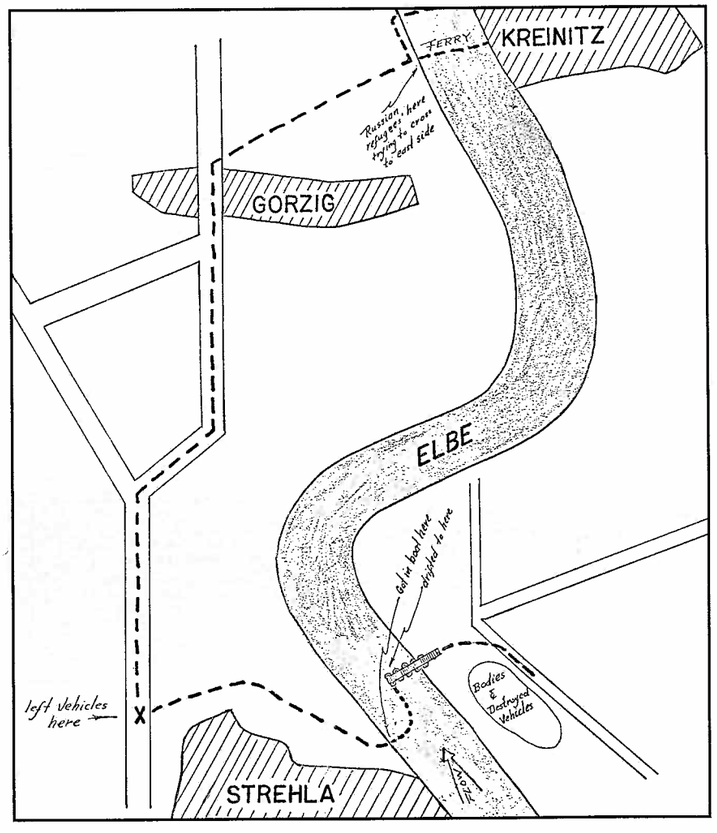
Ever since the war, a strong competition has existed between the Elbe towns of Torgau on the one hand, and Strehla and Kreinitz on the other hand, because the former got all the publicity of the US-Soviet link-up whereas the latter two rightfully claim that the first official meetings actually took place in their community. However, nobody seems to remember that the claim of the very first contact goes to the tiny hamlet of Leckwitz, two miles west of the Elbe. This sketch comes from the Kotzebue combat interview.

It was here, at 11.30 p.m. on Thursday, April 25, 1945 that the Kotzebue patrol met their first Russian, a lone horseman, in the yard of this Leckwitz farm. Kotzebue: 'The Russian just turned slowly around in the saddle and looked down on the Americans. He was very non-descript but very rugged-looking. He had a definite Mongol face and was obviously very suspicious of us. He was riding a small pony that had long smooth hair. There was no offer to shake hands, there was no friendly waving. The conversation was short. I asked one of my soldiers, Pfc Joe Polowsky, to find out if the Russian could tell us where his unit was. Polowsky, who could speak Polish, in turn asked a Polish DP to ask the Soviet soldier, since the DP could speak Russian. The Russian replied curtly "at the Elbe". I felt slightly disappointed. The whole meeting had a very distant and strange feeling.' The horseman has since been named as Aitkalia Alibekov from Kazachstan.

'The Russian was a cavalryman. He was extremely reticent. He was quiet, reserved, aloof, suspicious, not enthusiastic. The first meeting of the two armies certainly was not one of wild joy, but rather of cautious fencing. Or, perhaps, the Russian soldier was just plain stupefied and couldn't realise what had happened. *[He has since been identified as Aitkalia Alibekov from central-Asian Kazachstan.]*

'There were only a few words exchanged, for Kotzebue by now was very anxious to meet the Russian command. He asked the cavalryman where his command was, and the Russian merely waved his arm and pointed east. He told the patrol that his headquarters was farther to the south in an easterly direction. He said that one of the Polish partisans, newly freed, and markedly noisy and loud-mouthed, could lead the patrol there faster than he could. The Pole was enthusiastic about the opportunity to help.

'He led off, at first riding a motor bike he had "liberated" somewhere, but that soon broke down and he was taken aboard the hood of the lead Jeep. They raced on and came to the road leading to the bank of the Elbe river just north of Strehla, where they drove along for about a couple of hundred yards. They looked across the river and saw the wreckage of a column of vehicles, the remnants of a pontoon bridge, and people moving about near the debris. The column quickly stopped and everyone piled out.



Carrying on to Strehla and the Elbe, the patrol then spotted a larger Russian force on the east bank, and after the agreed-upon recognition flares had been fired, proceeded to make contact. This sketch from the combat interview is inaccurate in that it suggests the patrol's first crossing of the Elbe took place just north of Strehla, whereas in actual fact they drove down to the river through the town, reaching the water's edge and stopping at the site of the town ferry.

Kotzebue whipped his field glasses to his eyes and looked at the east bank. He saw brown-skirted figures. He later said he knew they were Russians from the way they wore their medals into battle, and the sun was throwing its rays back from the metallic decorations. These were Russians, this time in force. The time was 1205.

'The lieutenant turned to Pfc Edward P. Ruff and told him to fire the two green flares which was the agreed signal of recognition between the two armies. Ruff had only to be told once, for he was ready. The flare clusters soared into the sky over the Elbe from the launcher on the end of his carbine.

'The Russians did not give the answering signal, but the whole party started walking down from the road to the river edge. They felt they had met friends but, just to make sure, Kotzebue told Ruff to fire still another flare so that there would be no mistake on the way down. The Pole with them was all grins and swaggered as he walked. He was sure of himself. In the loudest voice imaginable, the partisan hollered across the river in a torrent of gibberish, the only word of which Kotzebue could understand was "Amerikanski". That was enough. There was a lot of hollering on the far side, the general gist of which was for the Americans to cross to the east side.

'The only way across was by boat, since the pontoon bridge, evidently German, had been blown out of the west bank of the river and only about one half of it projected from the east bank. There were two barges and two sail-boats chained together near the west shore, but they could not be loosened. The only thing to do was to blow them apart. Kotzebue tentatively laid a hand-grenade on the knot of chains, saw that it would balance, pulled the pin, and took off for cover. The resulting explosion ripped the chains and freed the boats. The way across was open.

'Into one of the sail-boats piled Kotzebue; Ruff, his driver; Pfc John Wheeler, a machine gunner; Pvt Larry Hamlin, a rifleman who was not even assigned to the regiment, but had gone on the patrol anyway; Tech/5 Stephen A. Kowalski, a medic who had been brought along as a Russian interpreter; Pfc Joseph P. Polowsky, a rifleman who had been brought along as a German interpreter; and the Pole.

At the ferry, Kotzebue blew the chains securing a sailing boat, and with six others set out for the east bank. Only then did they realise they had no oars. The current was very swift and they had to use the seats, their gun butts and hands, to paddle across the river. It was touch and go as to whether they would make it and they were all so excited they didn't notice how cold the water was. The ferry site as it looks today, with Lorenzkirch village in the distance across the river.

'They started across upstream of the pontoon bridge and, as they got out into the channel, were pushed downstream by the swift current which hid itself beneath the placid surface of the river. There were a few anxious moments for fear of missing the pontoon bridge altogether but, finally, the boat nosed itself into the junction between the two western-most floats and they were stopped. *[A Russian soldier on the bridge leaned out and threw them a line.]* Everyone jumped out of the boat, first hooking it on to the pontoon, and started walking down to meet the Russians, one a young major, the second of unknown rank, the third a captain who was a press photographer.

[The Russians belonged to the 2nd Battalion, 175th Regiment, 58th Guards Infantry Division. Earlier that morning, the battalion CO, Major Fyodor Glotov, had sent a company across the Elbe to scout out the area. This company, the 6th led by Senior Lieutenant Grigori Goloborodko, had crossed the Elbe north of Strehla and established an observation post on Hill 129.7, about one kilometre north-west of Strehla and overlooking the Leckwitz-Strehla road. The OP had sighted Kotzebue's Jeeps at 1130 and this enabled Goloborodko to give the HQ east of the river advance warning of their coming. With Goloborodko, and in charge of company communications, was Sergeant Alexander Olshansky. Post-war Russian accounts have claimed that Goloborodko was actually the first officer whom Kotzebue met on the east bank and that Olshansky was the man who had thrown out the line. However, it is impossible to reconcile this with Kotzebue's account, as Goloborodko and Olshansky were both on the west bank and there is no doubt that Kotzebue's meeting took place on the east bank.]

As they approached the far shore near a broken pontoon bridge, the men could see 'a huge span of bodies starting at the eastern side of the bridge and fanning back for hundreds of yards. Most of the dead were civilians — men, women, children, plus baggage carts and all the animals.' Luggage and clothing was strewn everywhere. The Russians practically had to wade through the dead to get to the Americans. The slaughter must have taken place quite recently but there was no indication as to what had caused it. What had happened was this. In February 1945, the Wehrmacht had built a pontoon bridge between Strehla and Lorenzkirch. However, on April 22, with the Russians approaching fast, German engineers had blown the bridge, even though hundreds of panic-stricken refugees were still trying to escape across. Trapped on the shelterless east bank, the refugees had been hit first by Soviet planes and artillery, then possibly also by German shelling. *Left:* **Here, local historian Heinz Schöne (right), explains the events of 50 years ago to Heinz Richter, who accompanied Karel Margry to Lorenzkirch.** *Right:* **The victims of the river flat massacre were buried in a mass grave in Lorenzkirch cemetery.**

'This meeting, too, was without exuberance. Everyone exchanged salutes, shook hands. The Russians were suspicious at first. Kotzebue, through Kowalski, told them that his was a small American patrol, gave his outfit, told them where he had come from, and explained that he wished to arrange a meeting between the Russian and American commanders as soon as possible.

'The Russian major said that his regimental commander already had been notified and was on his way to the scene. The time was 1230. Things began to thaw out and, before many moments had passed, everyone was smiling and exchanging compliments.

'As the regimental commander approached, Kotzebue stepped up, saluted, and reported that he was the leader of an American patrol which had come to make contact with his army. The commander returned the salute and they shook hands. Both exchanged phrases about how proud they were to be there, and that they all realised that it was an historic moment — a proud moment for both countries.

'Then they went into a discussion about Kotzebue's mission, and the Russian regimental commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Gordeyev of the 175th Rifle Regiment, a much-decorated hero, received the same information as had the major of his staff earlier. Then, he pointed out the mission of his army, which was to close a pincers movement on Dresden. Colonel Gordeyev said his regiment had been on the Elbe for several days but was not permitted to cross the river save with security patrols. He had been awaiting the arrival of the Americans and knew nothing of their order not to cross the Mulde river.

'Then, Colonel Gordeyev said that he would take Kotzebue and his interpreter to the Commanding General right away. Kotzebue demurred momentarily, saying that he wanted to make sure that his men, who were still on the other side of the river, would be all right. The colonel assured him that they would be taken care of and would be brought up to the ferry site farther north and crossed there. Thus, the two went to the main street of Lorenzkirch, where they got into one of several civilian cars impressed by the Russians, and had just started to move to the general's CP, when someone ran up and told them that the adjutant was on his way and wanted to talk to Kotzebue.

'The adjutant, a fat man with glasses, came walking up the street with two newsreel reporters and a lieutenant-colonel, the four of them straightening their tunics and primping so as to look their best for the visitor. Kotzebue and the colonel unloaded from their car and there was another general exchange of salutes and greetings, with the terms "proud" and "big moment" and "historic occasion" scattered liberally throughout the conversation. The adjutant said that this was the first meeting of the two forces of which he knew. Then the adjutant changed the plan for meeting the general. Instead of proceeding directly, he told Kotzebue to recross the river with four Russian soldiers — a lieutenant-colonel of infantry; a major of engineers; a captain of artillery; and a newsreel photographer, all of whom were anxious to accompany him to the American lines as emissaries — and then join the general further up-river.

'The whole party got back into the same sail-boat in which the Americans originally had crossed. The time then was 1305, one hour after they had seen the first group of Russians on the Elbe. They cut the ropes holding the craft to the pontoons and cast off. The boat was immediately caught in the strong current of the river and started downstream, despite the combined efforts of the Russians and Americans. Kotzebue took the rudder and everyone else bent his back to propel the boat across. They had a lot of strenuous fun and finally reached the other side some distance from the point where they had left the west bank the first time. By this time, about 15 minutes had elapsed and the Jeeps had moved along the shore to the landing point, Kotzebue having called to the drivers to bring the vehicles to the expected point of arrival. Here, everyone was introduced all around.

'Then the whole group was loaded into the five Jeeps and headed north from Strehla, through Görzig, and out on the open stretch of plain which reaches to the river opposite Kreinitz. On the way, there was a momentary embarrassment when they ran into a group of Russian horsemen who had crossed the river and were deployed with their weapons aimed at the Jeeps, thinking at first that they were a German patrol. The Russian officers with Kotzebue quickly straightened them out.

'Opposite Kreinitz, the party stopped momentarily at the southernmost of the two hand-drawn pontoon ferries, which was surrounded by groups of refugees at its western terminus. Then they moved to the second ferry. This was the one they were to use. It was a primitive affair with two pontoons lashed together, covered with some wooden flooring and two guard rails at either side, and held to a cable tied to trees at both sides of the river. To cross, several people pulled together on the cable and the craft floated over, guided by the cable.

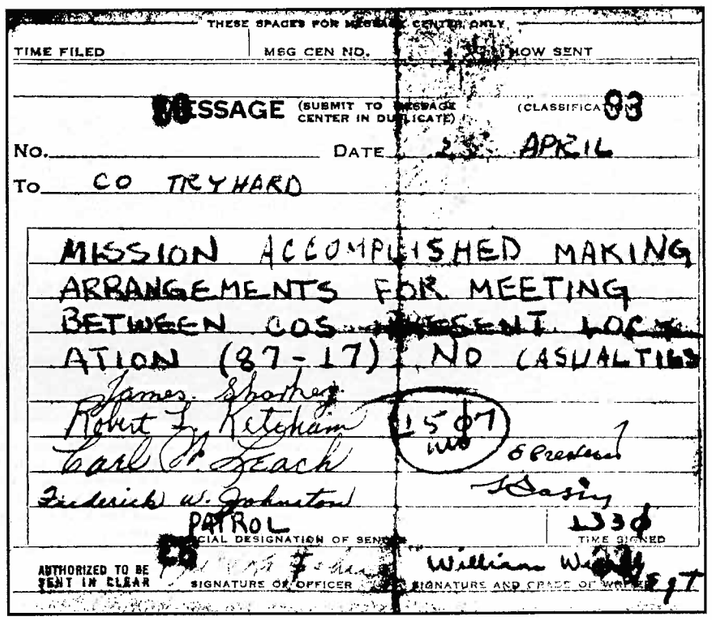
'Before loading up, Kotzebue dispatched one of his Jeeps to Kühren with a message for the regimental commander, to pick up the two Jeeps that had been left there, and to obtain any additional instructions which might be forthcoming. He sent his platoon sergeant, T/Sergeant Frederick W. Johnston, back, too, with orders to answer any further questions which might be asked or to clear up any points in the message which might remain cloudy at regiment. The radio message he sent was:

' "Mission accomplished. Making arrangements for meeting between COs. Present location (8717). No casualties."

'It was timed at 1330 and was received at regiment at 1515. *[Unfortunately, the coordinates in the message were wrong. Lieutenant Kotzebue had made a map-reading error, having mixed up Strehla with Gröba, a village near Riesa six kilometres further to the south.]*

'They started to load a Jeep on the makeshift ferry, but as they did, the wooden ramp collapsed and the front wheels of the Jeep were hung up on the craft. This tied up the crossing site, so another Jeep was backed down to the water's edge and, after several attempts, Kotzebue managed to tie a rope between the two vehicles so that the stuck

According to all Russian sources, the first soldiers to greet Kotzebue at Lorenzkirch were Senior Lieutenant Grigori Goloborodko, the CO of 6th Company of the 175th Rifle Regiment *(right)*, and his communications NCO, Sergeant Alexander Olshansky. However, from their own personal accounts, it is clear that both men were with their company on a hilltop OP just north of Strehla and west of the river — and therefore cannot possibly have been on the east bank. Yet, few people have ever commented on that obvious discrepancy with Kotzebue's account. The riddle can be solved by a look at the timings: Goloborodko reported the arrival of the Americans at 11.30 a.m.; Kotzebue says he was then driving the last miles from Leckwitz to Strehla, which was precisely the stretch of road overlooked by the Russian OP. So it appears that what Russian accounts have taken to be physical contact with the patrol was in fact merely a sighting. The matter was then further confused because Goloborodko and his men did meet Kotzebue sometime later, after he had recrossed the Elbe and was on his way to Kreinitz, but they seem at that moment to have been unaware of the fact that he had in the meantime already met other Russians on the east bank. It appears none of the veterans involved ever questioned the discrepancies in the two versions when they got a chance to meet in the 1980s.


THESE SPACES FOR MESSAGE CENTER ONLY

TIME FILED | MSG CEN NO. | HOW SENT

MESSAGE (SUBMIT TO MESSAGE CENTER IN DUPLICATE) (CLASSIFICATION) 93

No. DATE 23 APRIL

To CO TRYHARD

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED MAKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR MEETING BETWEEN COS PRESENT LOCATION (87-17) NO CASUALTIES

James Shoaf
Robert F. Ketcham
Carl R. Leach
Frederick W. Johnston

1507 MWD 6 Present

Daisy

PATROL — OFFICIAL DESIGNATION OF SENDER

1330 TIME SIGNED

AUTHORIZED TO BE SENT IN CLEAR — SIGNATURE OF OFFICER

William W... 1st Lt — SIGNATURE AND GRADE OF WRITER

The Russians at Lorenzkirch asked Kotzebue to cross back to the west bank and recross the Elbe three miles further north opposite Kreinitz, where he would be officially met. Before doing so, Kotzebue wrote out a situation report to the regiment, to be radioed from Kühren. However, in an error he would come to regret, he wrote down the wrong map co-ordinates: square 8717 on US maps is not Strehla or Kreinitz, but Gröba, six kilometres further south. Therefore, the plane sent out to locate the patrol could not find it and, as a result, the 69th Division HQ remained in the dark as to the precise details of the first link-up. As Kotzebue confided years later to Cornelius Ryan, when Major Craig joined up with him and told him how upset people back at HQ had been over his message, Kotzebue asked Craig: 'Well then, what the hell was my mission?' Craig replied: 'To find the Russians'. Shot back Kotzebue: 'Well, if you can remember the instructions you gave me then, how can you read and not understand my message when I say mission accomplished.' After the war, Kotzebue always felt that the officers who sent him on the patrol exceeded their authority by not explicitly telling him not to exceed the demarcation line and, therefore, when the resulting furore arose back at Division HQ they did not want to become personally involved. (CRA)

The meeting of the Kotzebue patrol with the Soviets at the Kreinitz ferry was restaged the day after the actual event for the benefit of war photographer Alexander Ustinov. Among those returning to the ferry for the re-enactment were (from right) Major Anatoli Ivanov of 58th Division HQ (on extreme right), field nurse Lyobov Kozinchenko (handing flowers to Pfc Byron Shiver). Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Gordeyev of the 175th Regiment (whom Kozebue had first met at Lorenzkirch) and Lieutenant Grigori Goloborodko, the OC of 6th Company of the 175th. Coming off the ferry are (from right) Pfcs Carl Robinson, Edward Ruff (who had fired the green flares at Strehla), Robert Haag and an unidentified GI. (Novosti)

Walking up the slipway: (L–R) Ruff, Kozinchenko, Shiver, Gordeyev and Ivanov. Goloborodko (in the white uniform) is on the left. Note, on the right, the combat engineers platoon under Senior Lieutenant Fyodor Verkhoturov building rafts. (Novosti)

Jeep was pulled off. In doing this, he got wet but the Russians seemed somewhat miffed that he had done anything at all, since they felt that they should have done all the work in clearing the blockage. Then, two boards were laid to the ferry making another ramp, the Jeep was loaded, and the vessel was pulled across.

'As they neared the eastern shore again, the group on the river noticed a crowd of Russians lined up on the bank, with photographers grinding away taking pictures of the Americans' approach. Then, Kotzebue heard someone exclaim spontaneously in English: "My God, look! There're some Yanks". He looked up and saw three OD-clad figures. Both groups began to yell and whoop and, as soon as they could get off the ferry, Kotzebue's men swarmed up and greeted the three. It was a real old-fashioned reunion.

'They all stood around chatting as the ferry went back and forth to bring over the rest of the patrol. The three men were Carl N. Leach of Sherman, Texas, who had been in the 106th Infantry Division; Robert T. Ketcham of Lapel, Indiana, who had been with the 101st Airborne Division; and a scot named Douglas, who had been with a British airborne division. All of them had been prisoners-of-war and had been freed when the Russians overran the camp in which they had been interned. They were overjoyed at seeing Americans. Most of the conversation during the wait was with these boys.

'When all were on the east bank, the patrol's three Jeeps took off with the three freed PoWs, after overcoming the Russians' objections to riding anyone extra on the vehicles, and went to the 175th Regimental Headquarters near Mühlberg, arriving there about mid-afternoon.

'At the CP, in a big farmhouse which had been taken over, a banquet table was set and everyone pitched into the spirit of the occasion. But first, Kotzebue asked to change his shoes and socks because his feet were wet and cold from the time he stood in the water to hook the Jeep from the ferry. The Russians quickly obtained some socks, and the lieutenant attended the first Russian-American banquet in his stocking feet.

'Shortly after things were under way, Major-General Vladimir Rusakov, the commander of the 58th Guards Infantry Division, came in and joined the party. The general was quite reserved and seemed to be trying to size up the men and the situation as he toyed with a plate of soup which was set before him. Obviously, he was conscious of the big rank gap which existed between him and this first American officer to contact his division. However, everyone joined in numerous toasts to the late President Roosevelt, President Truman, Prime Minister Churchill, Marshal Stalin, "everlasting friendship", and whatever else came to mind.

'Rusakov left the party soon after he arrived, but with the injunction for everyone to continue to enjoy himself. He wasn't gone long before he arrived with another general, a tall, severe, forbidding man dressed in a leather shortcoat, the corps commander *[Major-General Gleb Baklanov of the 34th Corps]*. The corps commander remained only a few minutes, standing all the while, but he, too, drank several toasts. When he

Although the memorial stone at the Kreinitz ferry claims that this is the site of 'the first meeting of soldiers from the Red Army and the US Army', it was, after Leckwitz and Lorenzkirch, actually Kotzebue's third meeting.

Left: **A Russian officer talks to the crew of one of the Jeeps. Upright in the vehicle is Pfc Joe Polowsky, the German interpreter of the patrol.** *Right:* **For years, these pictures were thought to have been taken at Kreinitz but they were in fact taken at Burxdorf, some 12 kilometres north of Kreinitz near Mühlberg, where the Russians had their CP. (Novosti)**

Kotzebue (centre, with pipe) and his patrol are besieged by curious Russian officers, soldiers and war correspondents. On the right and talking to the men in the Jeep is Sergei Krushinsky, special correspondent of *Pravda*, who had just before landed by light plane alongside the Elbe near Lorenzkirch. (Novosti)

left, General Rusakov accompanied him. Remaining was a young, good-looking lieutenant-colonel they hadn't seen before, who told Kotzebue that, as soon as he was ready, they would all start back for Trebsen and the requested meeting, the colonel at the head of a party of 15 Russian emissaries.

'Within a very short time, the party started to get into cars for the first leg of the journey to the American headquarters and was just about ready to go, when an officer messenger came up and relayed a message from General Rusakov saying that they were not to cross the river. At this point, everyone looked very disappointed. But they loaded up anyway, since Kotzebue wanted to go back to the ferry site to see whether or not the radio Jeep had returned and, at least, send the information about this new turn of events — that the Russians could not come to the Americans, so they would have to come to the Russians.

'When he got to the ferry, Kotzebue saw some Jeeps across the river and thought his radio Jeep had returned with the other vehicles. But when he entered the house which was serving as a battalion CP, there were Major Craig, the 2nd Battalion executive; Captain George J. Morey of 273rd Regimental HQ; 2nd Lieutenant Thomas P. Howard of E Company; and combat historian Captain William J. Fox. It was the biggest surprise of all.'

Far left: **Kotzebue poses for Ustinov's camera: 'I could not help but feel that the Russians were disappointed in that the first American they met was merely a lieutenant which they considered to be cannon fodder.' Although it is clear from his combat interview of 1945 that Kotzebue did not really know the names of the three Soviet soldiers that had first welcomed him on the east bank at Lorenzkirch, in later years he seems to have accepted the Russian version that Lieutenant Goloborodko and Sergeant Olshansky of the 6th Company of the 175th Rifle Regiment were two of them. Whatever the truth, the photos taken at Burxdorf and at the Kreinitz ferry prove that Goloborodko did get to meet the Kotzebue patrol at a later moment, and, although not in any of the pictures, we can assume Olshansky was there as well.** *Left:* **Forty years later: in March 1985, Kotzebue, by then a retired lieutenant colonel, was reunited with Alexander Olshansky, by then a major-general, on the Elbe bank at Kreinitz for the ABC/BBC documentary 'Yanks meet Reds'. They were to meet once more, in the US in April 1986, before Kotzebue's death in Monterey, California, on March 19, 1987.**

Early on April 25, with no news from Kotzebue at Kühren, the 273rd Infantry had sent out two other Jeep patrols to find the Russians. One of them, a 51-men patrol in eight Jeeps led by Major Fred Craig, ventured out well beyond the five-mile limit, even disregarding explicit orders not to go further east. At 1645, they had just met up with two of Kotzebue's Jeeps, on their way from Kühren to Strehla, who told them Kotzebue had contacted Red Army soldiers when, just outside the village of Clanzschwitz, four miles from the Elbe, they themselves saw a column approaching on their right. Pfc Igor Belousovitch, the Russian interpreter with the patrol, grabbed his camera and took these pictures.

THE CRAIG PATROL

Late on April 24, after he had received Kotzebue's message that the patrol was going to spend the night at Kühren and with no further word from Kotzebue, Colonel Adams of the 273rd Infantry that night ordered two more patrols to depart the next morning, April 25. The orders were the same, 'to contact the Russians', again within the five-mile limit.

The first patrol consisted of 47 men of Companies E and H in eight Jeeps, nominally commanded by 2nd Lieutenant Thomas P. Howard, a platoon leader of E Company. However, Major Frederick W. Craig, the 2nd Battalion's executive officer (who had sent out Kotzebue the day before), and Captain George J. Morey, the assistant S-2 of regimental headquarters, had decided to accompany the patrol; also coming along was Captain William J. Fox, a combat historian of the 2nd Historical and Information Service from V Corps (the same one who in the next couple of days was to compile the combat interview with Kotzebue). So, in all, the Craig patrol counted 51 men. The second patrol was made up of the regiment's intelligence and reconnaissance platoon.

The two patrols left together early on the 25th, crossing the narrow, rickety wooden bridge over the Mulde at Trebsen at 0535. As they left, in Jeeps mounting machine guns, no one yet had heard anything more from Lieutenant Kotzebue in Kühren.

Ten minutes later, the two groups passed the last outpost and parted, each going its own way. The members of the I & R platoon apparently accepted the limitation without question and stayed within the five-mile boundary all day.

The Craig patrol, on the other hand, took the restriction less seriously. To a man they entered into a kind of humourous conspiracy to meet the Russians, regardless. Craig and the men with him, like Lieutenant Kotzebue and his men, were caught up in the elation of the moment. Abroad in what was technically enemy territory, they followed a circuitous, sweeping route up and down side roads through Gornewitz, Denwitz and Fremdiswalde to Roda. Slowing down and cautiously reconnoitring each town before driving through, the patrol found most of them still asleep, with white flags hanging from the houses. When they radioed a first position report, regiment replied: 'Hold patrol in vicinity you are now in. Do not proceed any further. Search that area.'

At 0915, they entered the larger town of Wermsdorf, where they found a big hospital and many freed foreign labourers. Through an interpreter, Craig ordered the burgomaster to have the population hang out white flags and for all soldiers to turn themselves in at the hospital at 1500. If anything untoward happened, he warned, the burgomaster would be shot and the town levelled by artillery.

Wermsdorf was just short of the five-mile boundary line. On reporting back to regiment, the patrol received permission to go north: 'Have your patrol proceed to vicinity of 636166 [the town of Deutsch-Luppa]. Search area and report.'

The patrol left Wermsdorf at 1100 and headed north through the Wermsdorf forest. At its northern exit, they captured a German sanitary company without opposition. Many regarded it as merely an unwanted delay in their search for Russians. Just before noon, they met two Russian displaced persons who, through the patrol's Russian interpreter, Pfc Igor Belousovitch, told them that the Russians had a pontoon bridge across the Elbe at Strehla, had had patrols in Oschatz earlier that morning, but had withdrawn them to Strehla. It was now clear to the patrol that if they wanted to meet Russians, they would have to go well beyond the zone limit.

Shortly before, Colonel Adams had specifically ordered Craig to advance no farther: 'Repeat instructions. You do not proceed beyond new area'. At 1305, Craig received another 'stay' order. However, since the first message referred back to the earlier order to 'search area' and the second qualified the order with authority 'to scout out the area' near where the patrol was located, on both occasions Major Craig used this authority to justify continuing toward the east.

Craig had another incentive to continue: Captain Fox, the combat historian. Rationalising that he was not subject to the five-mile restriction, Fox insisted that if Craig felt obligated to turn back, he personally would continue to contact the Russians, provided the major lend him a Jeep and the interpreter.

By 1500, the patrol had passed Calbitz, two miles east of Deutsch-Luppa. All along the route, they met streams of freed Allied PoWs and slave labourers — some drunk, some looting, all of them waving — and panic-stricken German refugees.

The Soviets belonged to the 1st Guards (Zhitomir) Cavalry Regiment of the 1st Cavalry Corps which, like the Americans, had sent out patrols into the area between the Elbe and Mulde. The meeting was short, but both sides managed to make a short speech, after which each patrol went its own way.

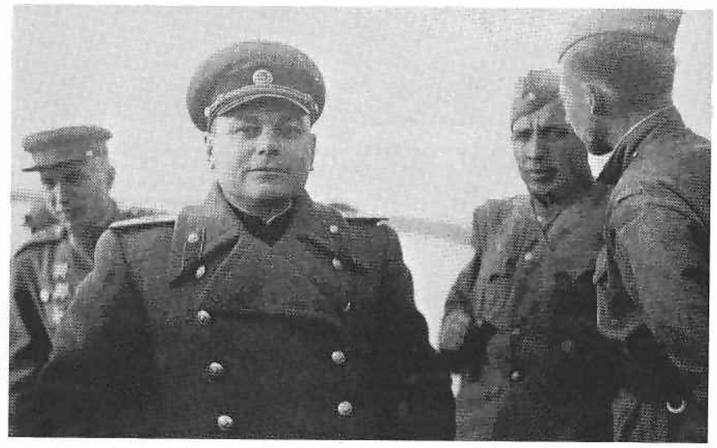
Meanwhile, at 1515, Kotzebue's radio message about his meeting with the Russians had come in at the 273rd Infantry CP back at Trebsen. Colonel Adams immediately telephoned the information to the division's chief-of-staff at the division CP at Naunhof, seven miles further back. Hardly had he put down the receiver when the division commander, Major General Emil F. Reinhardt, was on the phone. Reinhardt was irate. As late as that morning, he had been at Adams's command post where he had reiterated the order that patrols were to go no more than five miles beyond the Mulde. If Kotzebue was where the map co-ordinates indicated, he was far beyond the Mulde at the Elbe itself on the fringe of the town of Riesa.

General Reinhardt's first reaction was to clamp a black-out on the news until Colonel Adams could verify it by a meeting with the Russians himself. Rationalising that Kotzebue might not have known of the five-mile restriction, Reinhardt was still reluctant to publicise the contact without some confirmation. Time for proof was short, for despite all efforts to contain the news, rumours of a meeting with the Russians were rife throughout the division, and correspondents already were deserting neighbouring divisions to rush to the 69th's command post. To speed confirmation, Reinhardt directed Adams to cancel arrangements for a personal meeting with the Russians pending a flight by the division G-3 in an artillery spotter plane to the site Kotzebue had specified.

The results of the flight further confused the issue. Taking along an interpreter in a second plane, the G-3 flew to Gröba, which marked the co-ordinates Kotzebue had mistakenly given. Anti-aircraft fire at Riesa turned both planes back.

Two hours after the second stop order from Colonel Adams, the Craig patrol was still travelling eastward. The patrol's radio was delightfully void of any more orders, and Craig sent no further reports on his position lest they generate a new directive to halt.

At about 1600, near Terpitz, they stopped on a hilltop to survey the area. Through binoculars, they could see columns of troops moving north over the hill beyond Liebschütz, but a few stray German soldiers told them they were German columns retreating. The patrol carried on and was moving through Clanzschwitz, a village less than three miles from the Elbe, when two Jeeps overtook them. They carried men from Kotzebue's patrol on their way forward from Kühren after having relayed the message telling of the latter's meeting with the Russians.



No doubt disappointed that their meeting was not the first, Craig's patrol carried on to the Elbe and the ferry at Kreinitz. Here, they were welcomed by Major-General Vladimir Rusakov, the commander of the 58th Guards Infantry Division (who had earlier welcomed Kotzebue and his men at the 175th Regiment command post near Mühlberg). Another picture by Belousovitch.

All doubts about continuing to the Elbe erased by this news, Craig's patrol carried on and had just left Clanzschwitz heading for Leckwitz (the village where Kotzebue had encountered the lone Russian in the morning), when a cloud of dust away on the right revealed a group of horsemen, interspersed with a few men on motor cycles and bicycles, moving west on a tree-lined parallel road coming from Zausswitz. Craig halted his Jeeps and the men piled out, eager and excited at the prospect of meeting what obviously was a Russian cavalry patrol. The horsemen had spotted them too and, wheeling right, came galloping towards them.

'I thought the first guy would never get there', one soldier recalled. 'My eyes glued on his bicycle, and he seemed to get bigger and bigger as he came slower and slower towards us. He reached a point a few yards away, tumbled off his bike, saluted, grinned, and stuck out his hand. Then they all arrived.' The time was 1645.

The Russians belonged to the 1st Guards (Zhitomir) Cavalry Regiment. Most GIs could think of nothing else to say except

Shortly after, Craig's patrol was reunited with the Kotzebue patrol and Alexander Ustinov's pictures taken at Burxdorf in fact show a mixture of men from both patrols. Here, Captain Bill Fox, the V Corps combat historian who accompanied the Craig patrol (centre), discusses the situation with Major Ivanov (with goggles on cap) and Colonel Spiridon Rudnik (next to Ivanov), Chief-of-Staff of the 58th Division. Captain George Morey of the 273rd Regimental HQ is behind Ivanov; Major Craig on this side of the Jeep. Standing behind the machine gun is Byron Shiver of Kotzebue's patrol. (Novosti)

'Amerikanski' to which the Russians replied with 'Russki'. Pfc Belousovitch, the Russian interpreter, spoke to the senior Russian lieutenant: 'I greet you in the name of the American army and our commanders at this historic occasion. It is a privilege and an honour to be here.' The Russian — equally eloquent — replied: This is an historic occasion. It is a moment for which both of our armies have been fighting. It is a great honour for me to be here. It is wonderful that we have met in this place. It is a moment which will go down in history.'

The meeting was short, lasting little over three minutes. Then, the Russians went on their way south toward Dresden, while Craig and his patrol hurried on to the Elbe to join Kotzebue's patrol. Finding the scene of the original crossing at Strehla deserted, they went north to the ferry site at Kreinitz. The command group and a few men crossed to the east bank, where General Rusakov of the 58th Guards Division saw it his duty for the second time in the same afternoon to welcome an American force. Through Belousovitch, he wanted to know where the rest of the US army was. When was it coming to the Elbe and with how much armour? A patrol with just a few Jeeps just wasn't in the book. Rusakov told them that the Kotzebue patrol were 'being entertained elsewhere', then led the four American officers into the nearby CP, where there were toasts in vodka to Roosevelt, Truman, Churchill, Stalin, the Red Army, the US Army, and, so it seemed to the Americans, to every commander and private soldier in each army. Shortly after, Lieutenant Kotzebue came in and, much to his surprise, found the Craig patrol.

Back at the 273rd Infantry headquarters on the Mulde, a radio message from Major Craig arrived shortly before 1800: 'Have contacted Lieutenant Kotzebue who is in contact with Russians'. To Colonel Adams, that confused the issue more than ever. Had Craig also patrolled as far as the Elbe? Did he mean he had made *physical* contact, or what? Had everyone gone crazy?

Corporal Stephen Kowalski, the Russian-speaking medic with Kotzebue's patrol, exchanges notes with Colonel Rudnik. Further recognisable around the Jeep clockwise are Major Craig (drawing his cigarette), Pfc Belousovitch (behind the Russian lieutenant in the dark uniform), Major Ivanov, Captain Morey (with the 69 patch) and Captain Fox (talking to Morey). Second from left in the background is nurse Kozinchenko. As fraternisation went on, Major Craig radioed back to regiment that he had 'contacted Lieutenant Kotzebue who is in contact with the Russians', expecting to be ordered to bring back emissaries to the American lines. However, no such orders came. Craig and Kotzebue were unaware that a considerable panic had arisen at regimental and division HQ over their disregard of the five-mile boundary; and that, unknown to all, about 20 miles further north, a third patrol was about to steal the glory from them. (Novosti)

The town whose name has become synonymous with the American-Soviet link-up: Torgau on the Elbe. With its important river crossing, the town, which dates back to the 10th century, had always been of military-strategic importance. Frederick the Great of Prussia had beat the Austrian-Imperial Army outside Torgau in 1768. Napoleon and the Prussians had developed it into a fortress town in the 19th century. US Signal Corps photographer Tech/5 Braun pictured the town from a light plane on April 26, one day after the link-up there. Smoke from fires started by Russian shelling still hangs over the town. Overlooking the road bridge, blown the night before the link-up, is the town castle, Schloss Hartenfels which played such a prominent part in the link-up here. The view is south-west. (USNA)

THE ROBERTSON PATROL

Meanwhile, unknown to either Kotzebue or Craig or any 69th Division headquarters, another patrol of the 273rd Infantry was heading east. Two days earlier, on April 23, the burgomaster of Wurzen, eight miles to the north of Trebsen and on the Mulde's east bank, had begged permission to surrender his town to the 273rd. Since the burgomaster's purpose was to release thousands of American and Allied prisoners and to surrender hundreds of German troops in the town, and since the restraining order on bridgeheads over the Mulde was yet to come, commanders up the chain of command had sanctioned the move. The bulk of the 1st Battalion, 273rd Infantry, crossed into Wurzen in the early evening of April 24 to participate in a chaotic night of processing both the liberated and the newly captured. With the 273rd were 2nd Lieutenant William D. Robertson, the 1st Battalion S-2, and his reconnaissance section. All night, Robertson and his little group were busy setting up a PoW enclosure and checking the area.

Next morning, April 25, Robertson was instructed by battalion headquarters to survey the roads leading into Wurzen to get a rough idea of how many refugees were coming into town. This would enable the 69th Division to make adequate provisions for food and shelter. He was also to plan and guard further PoW enclosures. Robertson picked three men of his section to accompany him: Corporal James J. McDonnell; Pfc Frank P. Huff; and Pfc Paul Staub, who could speak German. In mid-morning — at about the same time as Kotzebue's patrol took of from Kühren again and Craig's patrol was entering Wermsdorf — the four men left Wurzen in one Jeep equipped with a machine gun. Having neither flares nor a radio with him, Robertson had no intention of contacting the Russians as he headed eastward.

Thus, on the morning of April 25, four separate groups of the 69th Division's 273rd Infantry — Kotzebue, Craig, the I & R platoon, and Robertson — were moving eastward. Only one, the intelligence and reconnaissance platoon, was concerned enough with the five-mile restriction to comply with it.

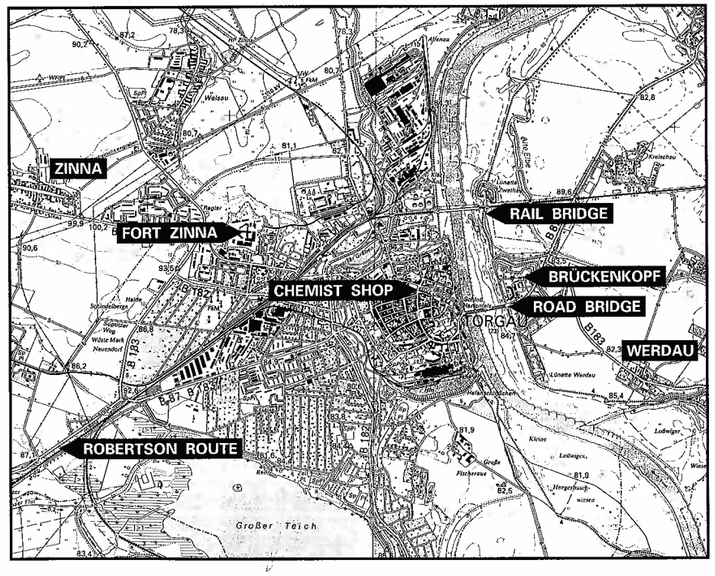
Without orders, or even intention, to contact the Soviets, a four-man, one-Jeep patrol of the 1st Battalion, 273rd Infantry, led by 2nd Lieutenant Bill Robertson, had set out on the morning of April 25 from Wurzen on the Mulde (*above*) to scout the area for surrendering Germans or freed Allied prisoners.

Moving from one town to the next, Robertson had long crossed the five-mile line when, at Sitzenroda, he met some released British PoWs who told him there were many other Allied prisoners at Torgau, eight miles further on. Only then did the thought occur that they might find Russians as well.

One of the men in Robertson's Jeep, Pfc Paul Staub, carried a private camera. As the Jeep (its anti-wire device can be seen in the foreground) rolled into Torgau from the south-west, Staub snapped this picture. On the right is one of the bridges of the Schwarzer Graben canal blown by the Germans only a few hours before. (P. Staub)

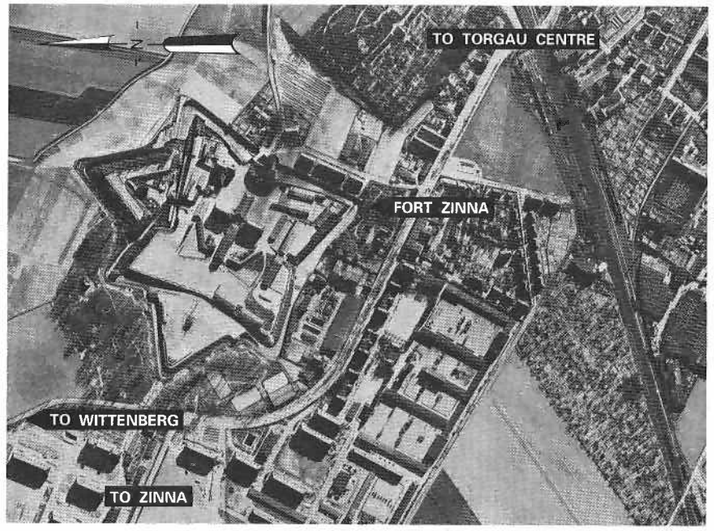
Robertson's patrol experienced much the same reactions to the arrival of Americans in the German towns and villages as did the other patrols. On their first foray, they drove east a few miles, meeting only a few refugees, whom they urged on to Wurzen. They returned to the town and, at about 1000, took another road leading north-east. They had gone some distance when they met a German rifle company of about 300 men plus officers. Accepting their surrender, Robertson had them stack their rifles after breaking the stocks, and pile their pistols and other side arms in the back of the Jeep. After writing out a 'safe-conduct' pass, he sent them back towards Wurzen. A little later, the patrol chased and stopped a German staff car, found it full of medical officers, and sent them back to Wurzen too. Carrying on, they captured two SS men, who offered minor resistance, disarmed them, and put them on the front of the Jeep. Although Robertson still had no real intention of trying to find the Russians, he kept moving from one town to the next until at Sitzenroda, a little past the mid-point between Mulde and Elbe, a group of released British prisoners told him there were many American PoWs, some of them wounded, in a prison camp at Torgau on the Elbe. Already exhilarated by the ease with which he was moving across the no man's land between the two rivers, Robertson used the information to justify his continuing to Torgau, rescuing the prisoners, and if possible, meeting the Russians.

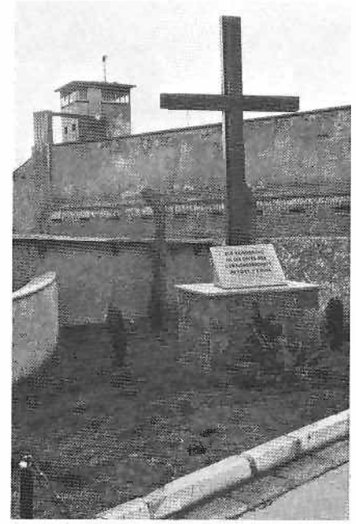
Torgau is a town on the west bank of the Elbe. Until 1945, the war had hardly touched the town. However, all this changed in March, when the OKW declared all towns between the Oder and Elbe 'fortresses'. Major Freiherr von Schlotheim was appointed fortress commander with orders to defend Torgau against attacks from both east and west. On March 9, he ordered the inhabitants to help dig anti-tank ditches and build field fortifications around the town. On April 11, the headquarters of XLVIII. Panzerkorps (General der Panzertruppen Maximilian Freiherr von Edelsheim) arrived to take over the defence of the area. His force consisted of ad hoc battalions made up of straggler units, convalescent soldiers, training and replacement units, Luftwaffe personnel and Volkssturm. On April 13, von Edelsheim ordered the whole population of Torgau to evacuate. Only military units, the police and



fire fighters were permitted to stay. By April 20, the Russians had advanced to within a few miles of the Elbe. That same day, von Edelsheim received orders to abandon the Torgau sector and move his troops 150 kilometres north to join the 12. Armee of General der Panzertruppen Walther Wenck for the final attempt to relieve Berlin. Late on the 23rd, Major von Schlotheim ordered the Torgau garrison to evacuate the town and join the move north. By then, his troops on the east bank had been pushed back to the Brückenkopf (literally: bridgehead), the old 19th-century fortress immediately across the river from the town. Next day, having destroyed their anti-tank and flak guns, the garrison marched out in a westerly direction. (They were captured near Dessau next day.) At noon, Russian artillery opened up on the town. On the night of April 24/25, at 3.30 a.m., after the last troops from the Brückenkopf had been withdrawn across, German engineers blew both the road and rail bridges over the Elbe. They also blew the harbour bridge and all but two of the smaller bridges over the Schwarzer Graben, the canal which runs parallel to the Elbe just west of the town centre. By dawn of the 25th, Torgau was almost completely deserted.

The modern map highlights the places which figured in the link-up and after.





Just west of Torgau lies Fort Zinna. During the war, it was notorious throughout Germany as prison for convicted German soldiers, and also used to incarcerate Allied secret agents and saboteurs. By April 25, the Germans had evacuated the prison, allowing the Allied prisoners to stay behind. As the Robertson patrol recced the outskirts of Torgau, they came upon two of the PoWs, both Americans, Ensign George Peck and Sergeant Victor Berruti, who promptly joined the patrol. *Left:* **This aerial was taken by 1st Lieutenant Joseph R. Gill of the 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Group of the US Ninth Air Force from a P-51 Mustang on April 16, 1945. (NASM)** *Right:* **Today, Fort Zinna is still a prison. After the war, the Soviets used it as an internment camp, and the GDR authorities to lock up political prisoners. Now, a memorial cross has been erected near the entrance, and a Documentation Centre founded to record the prison's history under three totalitarian regimes.**

On the western outskirts of the town lay another old fortress, Fort Zinna. During the war, Torgau was the seat of the Reichskriegsgericht (Reich War Court) and Fort Zinna had gained notoriety throughout Germany as military prison for convicted Wehrmacht personnel. It was also used to incarcerate special prisoners-of-war, like spies, saboteurs, all sentenced to death for espionage. This group included French, British, Italian, Russian and Danish prisoners, as well as several Americans. All told, the prison still housed some 2,000 prisoners when, on April 20, a Wehrmacht field hospital moved in, filling the cellars of the fort with wounded soldiers. On the 23rd, orders came through to evacuate the whole fort and the adjoining PoW compounds along the Naundorf road. A French prisoner, Capitaine André Levacher, convinced the German authorities to allow the non-Germans to stay. The German prisoners left on the evening of the 24th and the field hospital next morning, leaving Fort Zinna in the hands of the Allied prisoners.

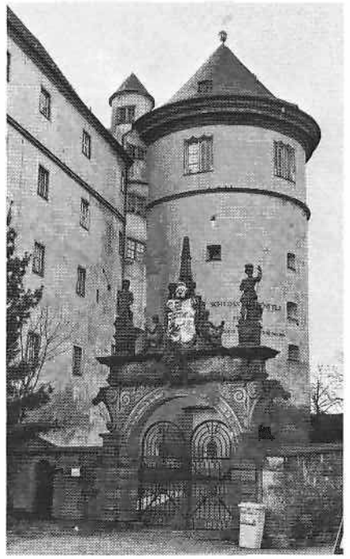
As Robertson's lone Jeep approached Torgau from the south-west in mid-afternoon, the men saw smoke from fires started by Russian artillery drifting over the town. Realising they had no means of identifying themselves as Americans should they meet any Russians, they confiscated a white bed-sheet from a German civilian they met on the road, tore out about a five-by-eight-foot section, tied it to a stick, rolled it up and tossed it into the back of the Jeep.

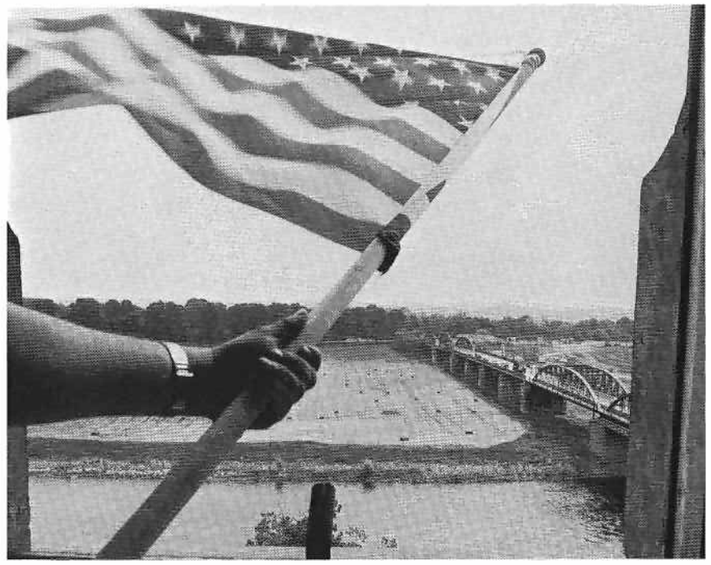
Entering Torgau at about 1330, they found it a ghost town. As they reconnoitred the outskirts, searching for the reported American prisoners, they came upon two of them. They were Naval Ensign George T. Peck of the OSS (who had been captured in the Italian Alps near Turin on October 13, 1944) and Sergeant Victor Berruti of the Army. The pair, who had been sitting by the side of the road to look out for any liberators, led them to the PoW compound near Fort Zinna and the other released prisoners. Robertson left the two captured SS men at the prison camp and, in their place, Peck and Berruti joined the patrol, arming themselves from the pile of weapons in the back of the Jeep.

Hearing small-arms fire from the direction of the Elbe, the little band crossed one of the intact Schwarzer Graben bridges and headed through the centre of the town toward it. They met a German civilian, who told interpreter Staub that the Soviets were on the other side of the river. The time was about 1400. Robertson decided to attempt contact. (At that moment, a Russian foot patrol under Lieutenant Mikhail Chizhikov, which had crossed at dawn, was actually scouting out the town, but the two groups did not meet.)

Encountering some sniper fire in town, Robertson and four of his men dismounted from the Jeep, spread out in a skirmish formation and worked around the snipers. By now, Robertson yearned for a better way to establish his identity. As he passed an apothecary shop on Mackensen-Platz, the idea came to him that he could make the confiscated white sheet into an American flag. Breaking into the shop, they found red and blue colour powders, and, mixing these with water, used them to fashion the sheet into a crude Stars and Stripes. By now, it was 1500.

Not having any green flares — the arranged recognition signal for US troops should they meet Red Army troops — the patrol improvised an American flag by painting a white bed-sheet with red stripes and a blue square. To find the necessary paint, they broke into an apothecary on Mackensen-Platz (today an electronics shop on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz). To gain entrance, Robertson shot out the lock and door pane of the shop next door. The Grube family, who owned both premises, have confirmed that in 1945 the buildings were connected by an inner passage. After his return home from Volkssturm service, Herr Grube found the remains of the paint in his shop. The flag had five horizontal red stripes and the white spots where the blue paint in the upper left corner did not stick were meant to be stars.



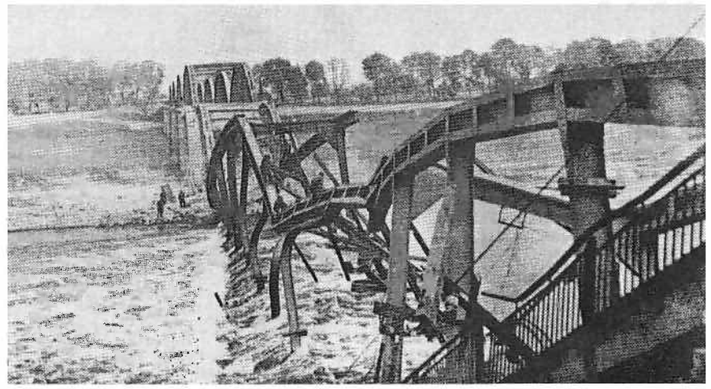


Left: **Having reached the Elbe, Robertson climbed the Flaschenturm, the watchtower of the Hartenfels castle, to wave his makeshift flag. Before it was restored a few years ago, the damage from the Russian anti-tank shell, which struck just below the roof-top bay window where Robertson was leaning out, could still be seen.** *Right:* **In 1992, local photographer Manfred Bräunlich recreated the flag-waving from the tower, albeit from a lower window, the attic no longer being accessible.**

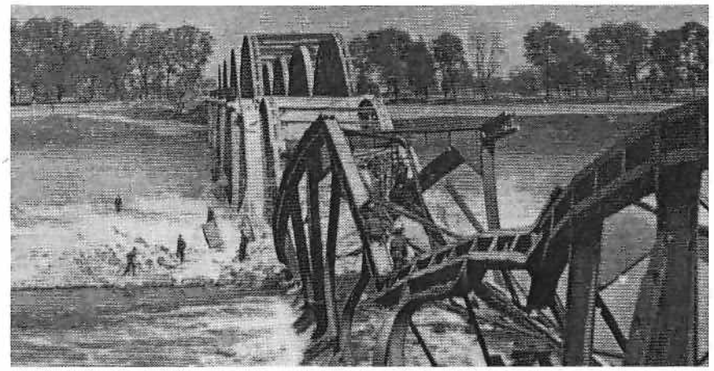
Moving cautiously on through Bäckerstrasse, they encountered two civilians, Ewald Scheibe and Willi Keil, who led them to the Elbe and Schloss Hartenfels, the castle on the river's west bank. Finding an entrance through a walled courtyard, Robertson, with the flag in hand, climbed into the tower of the castle, followed by McDonnell, Staub and Peck. Huff and Berruti stayed with the Jeep. Leaving the other three at the upper landing, Robertson crawled out at roof level. Immediately in front of him, in the swirling river down below, lay the broken structure of the blown road bridge. He began waving the flag so that the Russians could see it, and — prompted by Peck who knew a little Russian — shouting 'Amerikanski' and 'Tovarisch' (Comrade). By mistake he once shouted 'Kamerad!', but quickly followed it with 'Do you have anyone there who can speak English?'. The time was about 1530.

At long last, the firing stopped. Robertson could see figures moving about on the east bank, some 200 yards beyond the river on a sloping embankment in the cover of trees. (He was looking at the Brückenkopf.) The soldiers shouted something which Robertson did not understand. He shouted back. Then, the men on the far bank fired two green flares. That, as he remembered it, was the agreed recognition signal to be fired by the Russians. (The Russians should have fired a red signal.) Certain that the figures on the east bank were Russians, and frustrated for not having a flare with which to answer, Robertson sent Huff and Berruti with the Jeep back to Fort Zinna to bring up a Russian prisoner who could talk to his countrymen.

The Russians opened fire again, this time not just at the tower, but at the whole town. Trying to stay under cover as much as possible, Robertson continued to wave the flag and shout 'Amerikanski' and 'Tovarisch' over and over again. The firing stopped and the Russians started shouting again. Robertson hung the flag pole out of the tower at a right angle so that the stripes would be easily visible. In spite of this, a Russian anti-tank gun from the left side of the woods fired a round which hit the tower about five feet below Robertson.



The time is 4 p.m. Having finally convinced the Soviets of their identity with the help of a Russian prisoner, the Americans crawl across the girders of the broken road bridge. In front is Titov, the Russian prisoner, followed by Robertson, then Peck, then Pfc Frank Huff. Coming towards them is Sergeant Nikolai Andreyev.



Sliding down the 'V' of the bent girder, Robertson meets Andreyev above the swirling waters of the Elbe. Two unique pictures by Paul Staub.

Within an hour of making contact, Robertson started back to American lines with a Red Army liaison group made up of four men: Major Anafim Larionov, deputy commander of the 173rd Rifle Regiment; Captain Vasily Nyeda, CO of the 2nd Battalion of the 173rd; Senior Lieutenant Alexander Silvashko, the commander of the machine gun platoon at the bridge; and Sergeant Nikolai Andreyev, the man who had crawled towards them on the bridge. Their unexpected arrival created a sensation at the 273rd command post at Trebsen, which had been unaware of Robertson's patrol. Here, the regimental commander, Colonel Charles Adams, leads a toast to the link-up. L–R: Silvashko, Larionov, Adams, Andreyev (who was to be killed in the battle for Prague a fortnight later), and Robertson. (USNA)

After an interminable wait, the Jeep arrived with the Russian prisoner, a husky lieutenant pilot named Titov, and Peck and Staub explained to him in German what to tell his countrymen across the river. Titov leaned out of the tower and shouted a few sentences, 'drawing out his syllables in long, mournful cries'. At last, all firing ceased. A small group of Russians started walking down toward the river bank.

The Americans rushed down the stairs, jumped into the Jeep, and raced to the river, where the blown road bridge lay bent and twisted. Seeing no boats on their side, Robertson ran for the bridge but the freed Russian beat him to it and started across the girder. A soldier on the far side began crawling towards them. Robertson followed Titov, with George Peck and Frank Huff right behind him. The other three remained with the Jeep. Paul Staub was taking pictures with his private camera.

Titov met his countryman, passed him, and continued to the east. The Russian soldier carried on. About halfway across the Elbe, he and Robertson slid down the same 'V' formed by the bent girder. The Russian was Sergeant Nikolai Andreyev. He and Robertson shook hands and carefully pounded each other on the shoulder, trying not to fall into the river. Robertson could think of nothing to say. He merely grinned.

The time was 1600. Although word of Major Craig's contact reached the 273rd Infantry CP before that of Robertson's, the meeting on the girder above the swirling waters of the Elbe was by some 45 minutes the second contact between the armies from east and west.

Andreyev continued crawling to the west bank, greeting Peck and Huff on the way. The three Americans carried on to the east bank. Once there, Americans and Russians slapped each other on the back, jabbering, laughing, smiling. Neither understood the other's words, but the commonality of feeling was unmistakable. The first officer Robertson met was Senior Lieutenant Alexander Silvashko, commander of the machine gun platoon at the bridge. More Russians were arriving by the minute. One produced a box of captured rations, another brought wine and schnapps. They all drank a series of toasts. Both sides gazed at each other with open curiosity, and traded souvenirs such as cap badges and insignia. Robertson traded wrist watches with a Russian captain; another soldier gave him his gold wedding band.

A Russian major who spoke English then arrived. He told Robertson that he had made contact with the 8th Company, 2nd Battalion, 173rd Rifle Regiment, 58th Guards Infantry Division (the same division Kotzebue had met, but another regiment), part of the 34th Corps of the Fifth Guards Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front. He explained the men at the bridge had fired at Robertson's flag, because earlier a group of Germans had displayed a white flag to halt Russian fire and make good their escape. Robertson suggested they should make arrangements for their respective regimental and division commanders to meet at Torgau the next day at 1000.

The impromptu celebration went on for an hour. When Robertson at last announced a return to his own headquarters, he asked for a Russian liaison group to come with him. Four men volunteered to go: Major Anafim Larionov, deputy commander of the 173rd Regiment; Captain Vasily Nyeda, CO of the 2nd Battalion of the 173rd; Senior Lieutenant Alexander Silvashko, the commander of the machine gun platoon at the bridge; and Sergeant Nikolai Andreyev, the man whom Lieutenant Robertson had first met on the bridge.

At 1700, the three Americans re-crossed the Elbe with the four emissaries in a racing skiff the Russians had found. Dropping off Peck and Berruti at Fort Zinna with a promise of help, the other eight climbed into the Jeep and retraced the patrol's route. (On the way, they saw many German troops trying to reach American PoW camps but still marching fully armed. This made the four Russians very uneasy and, for a while, they feared they had walked into a trap.)

Shortly after 1800, the patrol arrived at the 1st Battalion command post in Wurzen. The battalion commander, Major Victor Conley,

However, the 69th Division commander, Major General Emil Reinhardt, was furious that first Kotzebue and Craig, and now Robertson, had disobeyed the five-mile restriction, and seriously thought of court-martialling the patrol leaders. Only after superior headquarters had condoned what had happened, did his anger subside. Meanwhile, he had ordered the Robertson patrol and the Russians to be brought to his command post at Naunhof. Here, a calmed-down Reinhardt presents Major Larionov with a pair of binoculars. Behind them is the special 'East meets West' sign prepared by division HQ in anticipation of the link-up. (USNA)

All now forgiven, Robertson was brought out and introduced to the press. One of the best-known link-up pictures was then taken by Signal Corps photographer Pfc Bill Poulson: the two lieutenants, Robertson and Silvashko, embracing each other in front of the sign. Silvashko, his combat medal prominent on his chest, has also been given binoculars. It was midnight before Robertson had answered all the questions fired at him by the war correspondents. He had had little sleep in the last 48 hours and was pretty worn out. By being the first to actually bring Russians back with him, Robertson, without meaning to do so, stole all the thunder and glory from Kotzebue and, to a lesser extent, Craig — both then still in limbo at Kreinitz. The Allied press corps followed Robertson and went to Torgau, more or less missing the real first link-up. (USNA)

had explicitly ordered him not to send patrols more than five miles beyond the Mulde, yet nobody in the 69th Division seemed to be following orders. Reinhardt even toyed briefly with the idea of a court-martial for Robertson. When the party arrived at his command post at Naunhof, he welcomed the Russians, but ordered Robertson and his men to be locked up in the G-3's office.

The fact that Robertson's exploit had produced tangible evidence entitling the 69th Division to the acclaim of first contact with the Russians apparently had something to do with Reinhardt's decision to play it straight. Once he himself had talked with the Russians, he interrupted the inevitable toasts and photographs to report the news to the V Corps commander, Major General C. Ralph Huebner, who initially reacted as irate as had Reinhardt. However, when Huebner in turn telephoned General Hodges at First Army, the army commander said he was 'delighted' with the news and told Huebner to *congratulate* Reinhardt. Hodges passed the news on to General Bradley at 12th Army Group, who took it calmly: 'Thanks Courtney, thanks again for calling', he said. 'We've been waiting a long time. The Russians certainly took their own sweet time in coming those 75 miles from the Oder.'

Mollified by this reaction near the top, Huebner reported back to Reinhardt, telling him to proceed with arrangements for a formal meeting of division commanders the next day, April 26, and of corps commanders on the 27th. Since nobody yet had any specific information on the site of Lieutenant Kotzebue's meeting, it was decided that the formal link-up celebrations would be held at Torgau.

This sanctioning from above put the Robertson patrol off the hook. All was forgiven. They and the Russians were then introduced to a mob of reporters and photographers. Scores of pictures were taken and Robertson was besieged with questions. By then, it was past midnight.

Their first reunion ever had been in Moscow in 1975, but at the 40th anniversary of the link-up held on April 25, 1985, Robertson and Silvashko met again at Torgau. (In between is Alexander Ustinov, who took the Kotzebue patrol link-up pictures at Kreinitz in 1945.) After the war, Robertson became a neurosurgeon in the Los Angeles area, and Silvashko a school principal at the village of Kolki in White Russia. (E. Bräunlich)

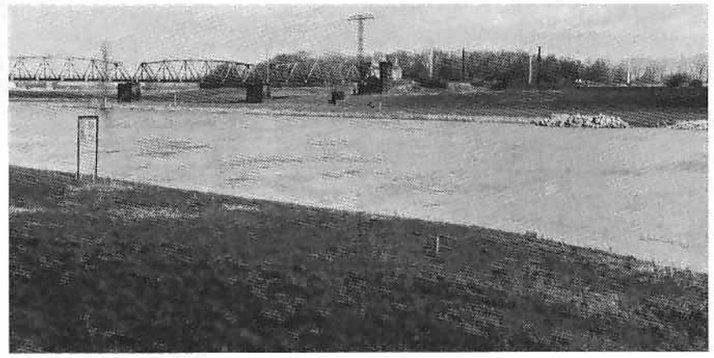
at first thought that Robertson had brought a bunch of released prisoners, but Robertson soon convinced him that the Russians were genuine soldiers. Conley's first impulse was 'to give them a bottle of whisky, a pat on the back, and send them back with a "nice knowing you"'. Then he figured he might as well phone regiment to say he had four Red Army men at his CP and what should he do with them.

To Colonel Adams, this development was even more startling than the ones with Kotzebue and Craig. He had ordered no patrol from the 1st Battalion, yet the battalion had four Russians as living proof of contact. He ordered them brought to his headquarters at Trebsen. Arriving there just before 2100, the Russians successfully ran a gauntlet of war correspondents and photographers who had almost inundated the 273rd Infantry command post. Robertson and his men had a far cooler reception, as they had ventured well beyond the five-mile limit. (Someone noted in the 273rd Infantry journal: 'Something wrong with an officer who cannot tell 5 miles from 25 miles'.)

When the division commander, General Reinhardt, learned of the new development, he was more irate than ever. His superiors

Next morning, April 26, the Robertson patrol led a 14-Jeep convoy back to Torgau for the official meeting of American and Soviet regimental commanders. The sign prepared by the 69th Division was set up nearby. Pfc Frank Huff and a Russian soldier re-create the painted image. (IWM)

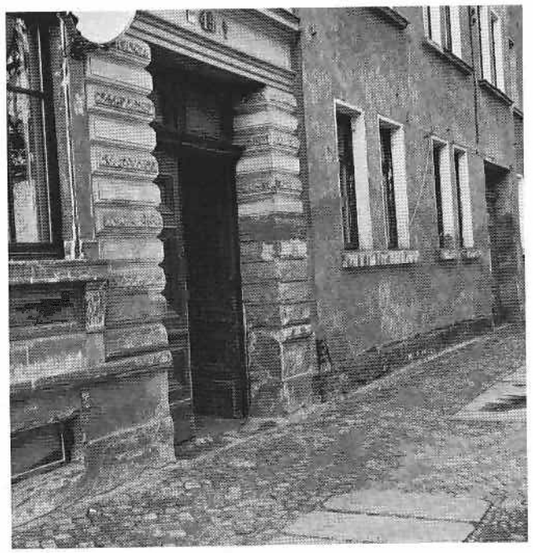
Early next morning, April 26, although still dog-tired after two nights of little sleep, Robertson and his men were back at the 273rd command post at Trebsen. A meeting of regimental commanders had been arranged for 1000 at Torgau. Also, the four Russians had to be brought back to their lines. Since the Robertson patrol already knew the way, their Jeep was to lead a 14-Jeep convoy to Torgau. The motorcade arrived at Torgau at dawn and, at 1100, Colonel Adams of the 273rd Infantry met his counterpart, Colonel J. Rogov of the 173rd Rifle Regiment.



The bridge in the background, which had been blown at its western end, carried the railway line linking Leipzig and Cottbus.

On the west bank of the Elbe, the four members of the patrol pose for posterity. L–R: Pfc Frank Huff, Corporal James McDonnell, Robertson, and Pfc Paul Staub (with whose camera this picture was taken).

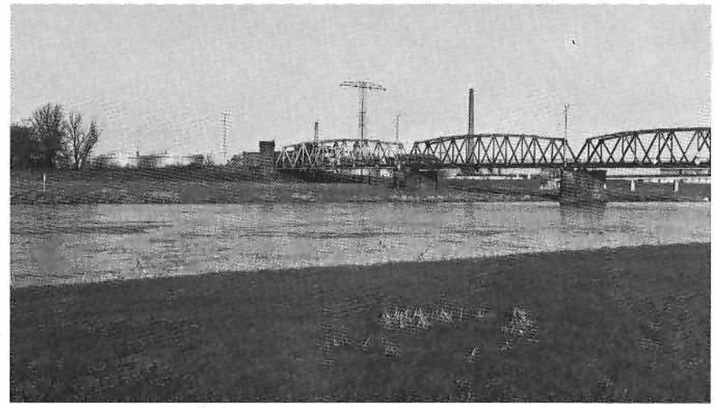
Huff and Robertson (kneeling) show the homemade flag they used to identify themselves to the Soviets. Previously, George Peck, the PoW who had joined the patrol, had torn off a corner of the flag 'as proof that this whole experience was not a dream'.The man on the left is Private Leslie Payne, not a member of the patrol. (IWM)



With no caption as to its location, the picture could have been taken anywhere, the most likely places being Wurzen, Trebsen, Naunhof or Torgau itself. Karel had a lucky stroke when he recognised the building as he explored Torgau. It stands on Pestalozzi-Weg (named Fürstenstrasse in 1945), the street overlooking the Elbe.

A week later, on May 3, Robertson's patrol was taken back to Eisenhower's SHAEF headquarters at Reims (see *After the Battle* No. 84) to present the historic flag to the Supreme Commander. In the belief that they had made the first contact, Ike promoted them all one grade on the spot. Robertson was then a 2nd Lieutenant and his papers for his 1st lieutenancy were being processed, so Ike's order made him a captain. In contrast, the members of the Kotzebue patrol were not promoted. For his part in the link-up, Kotzebue was almost court-martialled. General Reinhardt was all for pressing the charges, but was later talked out of it by Brigadier General Robert W. Mareist, the Division Artillery Commander, who impressed upon him the fact that it would look damn silly if he court-martialled the man who made the real first contact with the Russians. Kotzebue was then told he was awarded the Silver Star but, instead, he later received a Bronze Star in the mail. Although Reinhardt later told him he had written a recommendation for the Silver Star, and the US Army register carries him as having been awarded it, Kotzebue never received the actual medal. Eisenhower is reputed to have passed the flag on to the Smithsonian Institution, who are, however, unable to locate it today. (USNA)

Among the very first reporters to reach Torgau that April 26 were correspondent Ann Stringer of United Press and photographer Allan Jackson of International News Service, who flew to the place in two separate L-5 Cub planes provided by the G-2 of the US 2nd Division. They landed mid-morning in a field on the west bank of the Elbe, near the railway bridge. Climbing over a few road-blocks to enter the town, they came upon their first Russian who led them to the river bank where other Soviet soldiers took them across in a rowing-boat. On the eastern side they were met by a Lieutenant Gregori Otenchuku, a veteran of Stalingrad. One of the Cub pilots had also come along, and Jackson pictured him shaking hands with Otenchuku on the east bank. The smoke in the background is from the Torgau glass factory, still burning from the previous days' shelling. (IWM)



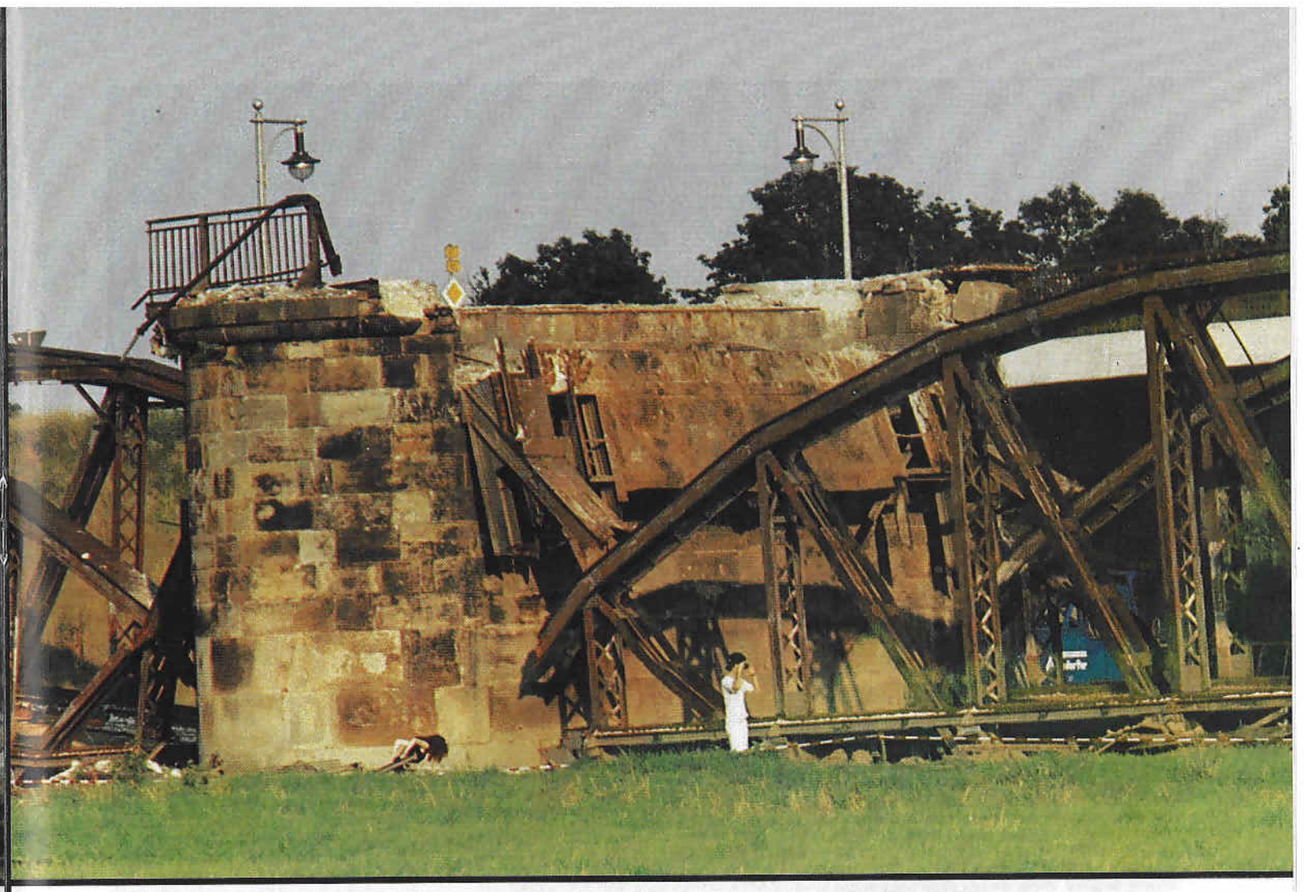
The Russians then insisted that the party meet their regimental commander and brought them to the Brückenkopf fort (a 19th-century fortress and former Wehrmacht prison standing amidst trees on the eastern bank of the river), where Jackson, having pre-focused his Super-Ikonta B, asked a GI to take this picture. Jackson is on the right with his hand in his pocket.

Stringer (centre) talks to Major J. Rogov of the 173rd Rifle Regiment. Note also the GI with the askew helmet and the white scarf in the background: he is Lieutenant Dwight Brooks, a 69th Division liaison officer, who managed to get himself in many of the Torgau pictures. The young Russian lieutenant on the left also appears quite often. (A. Jackson)

Above: Jackson then shot what was to become one, or rather two, of the classic images of the war. His hand-shaking pictures grew to be as symbolic for Victory in Europe as Joe Rosenthal's flag-raising picture on Iwo Jima became for Victory in the Pacific (see *After the Battle* No. 82). The three GIs have been identified as (L–R) Pfc John A. Metzer, Pfc Delbert E. Philpott and Pvt Thomas B. Summers. (Spaarnestad) *Below:* The Elbe 50 years on, though the view is somehow changed . . .

As Jackson described to us in a letter of September 1994: 'I took many general photos of Soviet and US soldiers talking and drinking, trading souvenirs, etc, but I felt I needed one striking photo to illustrate the meeting. It was then I spotted the blasted approach to the road bridge over the Elbe river. With the help of a French-speaking Russian, I rounded up some American and Russian soldiers and explained my idea of an action photo of them walking up to each other at the break in the bridge and shaking hands. I made several shots because the American on the left kept looking at the camera. It is bad newspaper form in a posed photo of this kind to have people looking at the camera!' Having got the story and pictures they wanted, Stringer and Jackson were anxious to get them filed as quickly as possible, and they decided that she would fly her story and Jackson's film directly to Paris to avoid the delay of going through First Army press headquarters. Stringer recrossed the river and asked the Cub pilot to fly her as far west as the plane would go. Spotting a C-47 heading west, they followed until it came down in a field. Landing beside it, Stringer asked the pilots if they could fly her on to Paris. Incredulous at first of her story, they were only convinced when she began typing it out on her portable typewriter. In Paris, she hitch-hiked to the US Press Centre at the Scribe Hotel, and filed her story and Jackson's film with the censor. The film was sent to Keystone which was representing International News Service in London and they released two of the handshake pictures which hit the front pages on the 28th.

Del Philpott, right, has returned to Torgau several times since he was pictured in the centre of Jackson's photo (for which Jackson received a congratulatory cable from Charles Smith, the Keystone manager). A research scientist with NASA for 30 years, Philpott is now retired and has just edited *Hands across the Elbe*, a book specially published for the 50th anniversary. With him in this picture are Alexander Silvashko and Bill Robertson who shake hands once again at Torgau in July 1993 . . . but unfortunately not on the original bridge. (E. Bräunlich)



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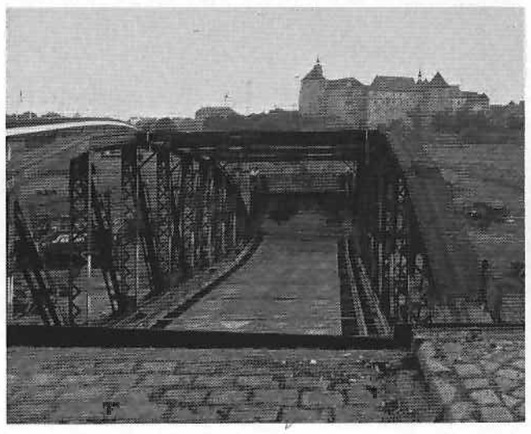
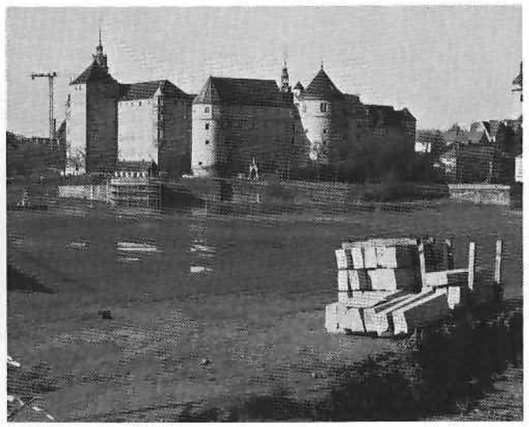
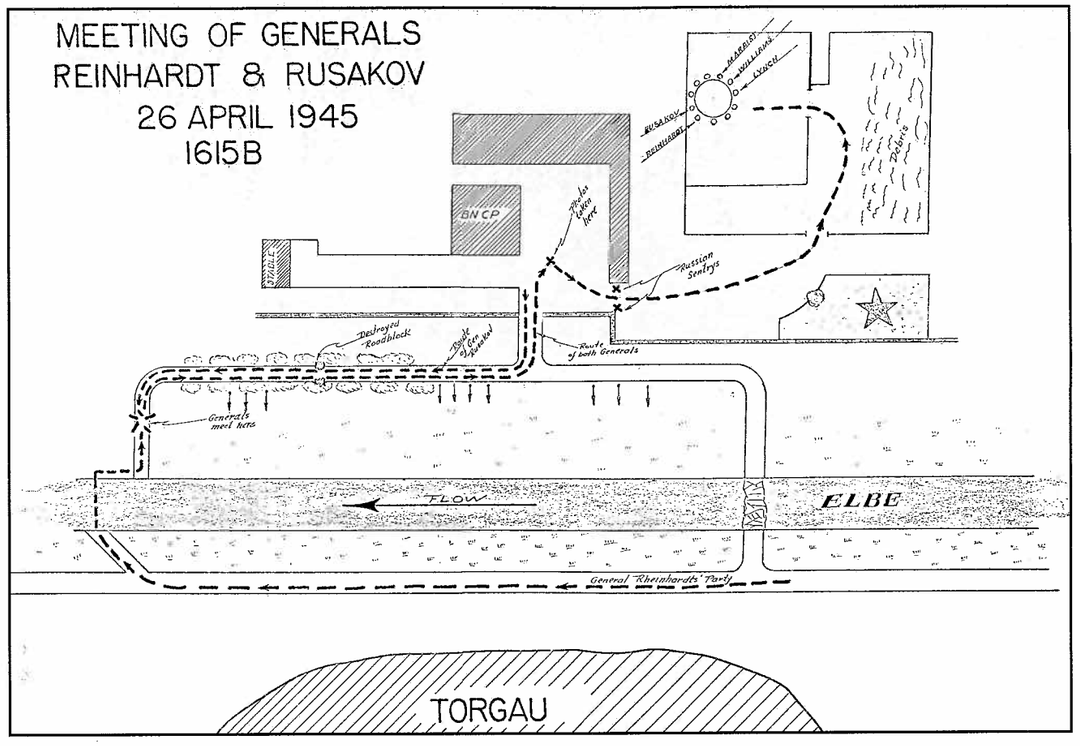




Four stages in the life of an historic bridge. *Above:* **An American MP and a Soviet traffic warden guard the road-block built by the Germans at the eastern end of the road bridge. (CRA)** *Right:* **In May 1988, on his way back from Colditz (see *After the Battle* No. 63), Karel Margry happened to pass Torgau and took this random picture of the rebuilt bridge. Seven years later, it turns out to be a perfect comparison . . . no longer possible today. By 1994, with a modern single-span bridge completed next to it, the German authorities felt there was no longer a need for the old and rusty structure. With no regard for its historic importance or the approaching 50th anniversary of the link-up, and without prior notification, the bridge was unceremoniously blown at 5.46 p.m. on June 16** *below left,* **raising a storm of protest (Anthony Bethel).** *Below right:* **The wreckage was quickly cleared; this is the view from the east bank today.**



Following the link-up between the fighting men of the United States and the Soviet Union, meetings between American and Russian general officers began with the opposing division commanders. General Reinhardt was to cross the Elbe to formally meet General Rusakov of the 58th Guards Division on the east bank, followed by a banquet reception at the Brückenkopf. This sketch from the US historical report illustrates the programme, although the lay-out of the Brückenkopf has been drawn far too large and the main road across the bridge should continue straight on past the fort. The other officers arrowed at the banquet table are Brigadier General Robert W. Mareist of Division Artillery, Colonel Allen C. Williams of the Quartermaster Corps, and Lieutenant Colonel John M. Lynch, CO of 2nd Battalion, 273rd Infantry. (CRA)

THE MEETINGS OF THE GENERALS

Meanwhile, to secure a safe passage through what was still 20 miles of no man's land, General Reinhardt had ordered the 272nd Regimental Combat Team to secure a corridor from Eilenburg on the Mulde to Torgau on the Elbe. The 272nd cleared an area extending some four kilometres to either side of the road of all remaining enemy, its 1st Battalion and B Company, 661st Tank Destroyer Battalion, occupying Torgau itself.

In the afternoon, Reinhardt himself came to Torgau for the meeting of division commanders. Crossing the Elbe in a skiff, he officially met General Rusakov, the man of many welcomes, on the east bank opposite Torgau at 1600. A crowd of some 70 US, British, French and Russian reporters, photographers and newsreel cameramen was present to record the first handshake. After that, the two generals proceeded to the Brückenkopf fortress, which was the command post of the 2nd Battalion, 173rd Rifle Regiment, for more pictures, followed by an official banquet, a hastily assembled feast with a main dish of fried eggs. Camaraderie, photographs, toasts, dancing in the street, and picnicking on the banks of the Elbe were the order of the day.

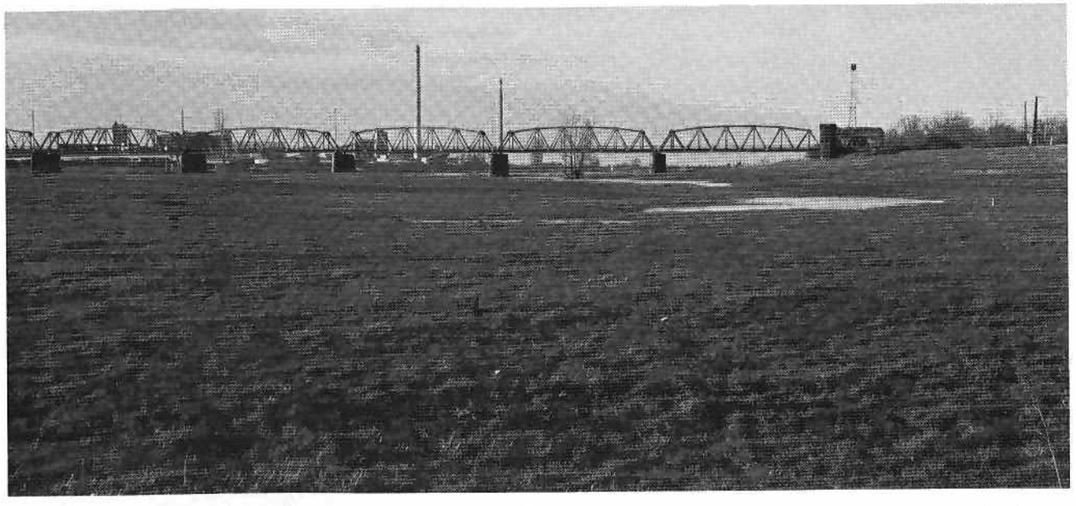
In the meantime, somebody at last had remembered to do something about Lieutenant Kotzebue, Major Craig, and their men, still waiting on the east bank up-stream near Kreinitz after sleeping out a night of many vodka toasts. Late on the 26th, a patrol brought them the news that history had passed them by. By the time Kotzebue and Craig got back to their own lines, the Robertson patrol had already got most of the publicity as well as the credit for the first 'official' link-up. (There were no hard feelings between the two groups. The Robertson patrol first learned of Kotzebue's patrol that same day at Torgau, and readily acceded that they were actually the second American unit to link up with the Russians.)

General Reinhardt arrived in Torgau at 4 p.m. Paul Staub pictured the General and members of his staff embarking for the far shore in a rowing-boat — not a very comfortable or dignified mode of transport for the top brass.

Having landed on the eastern bank, Reinhardt waits with Brigadier General Mareist (left) and Colonel Williams for the ceremony to begin. A Soviet Lend-Lease Jeep is parked behind. Picture by Tech/5 Charles B. Sellers. (USNA)

Left: General Rusakov (in dark uniform) comes marching down towards the Americans with his commanders and staff.

(USNA) *Right:* Today, the Elbe kilometre sign stands further down and closer to the river.



Looking north towards the railway bridge. At Torgau, the river is 155 kilometres downstream from the Czech-German border.

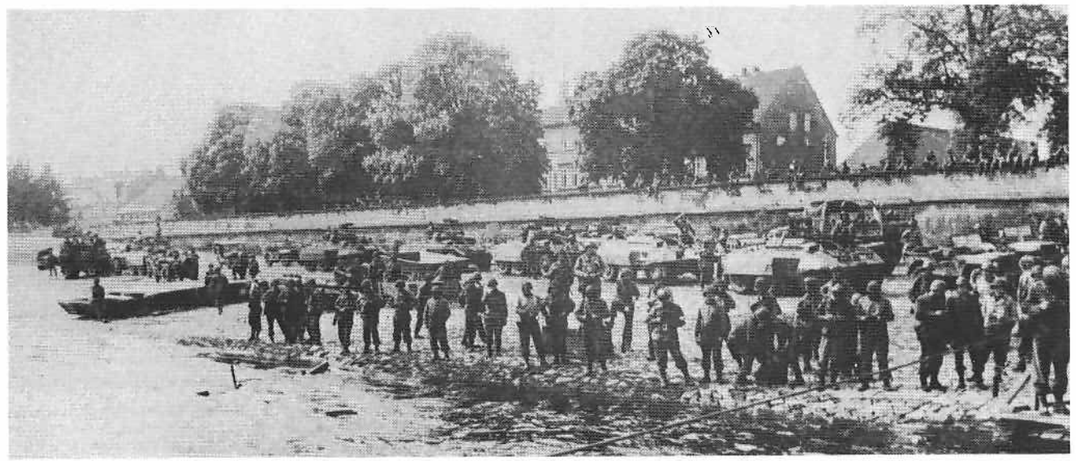
Left: The generals are lost midst a mêlée of reporters, photographers and cine cameramen. The American on the pony is Lieutenant Dwight Brooks of Los Angeles — home towns always being given in US captions for the benefit of the local press. (USNA) *Right:* The new road bridge replaces the characteristic spans of the old one.

Marching past a dismantled German road-block en route to the Brückenkopf forts (see sketch page 29). Note the Soviet Model 1927 76.2mm howitzer. (USNA)

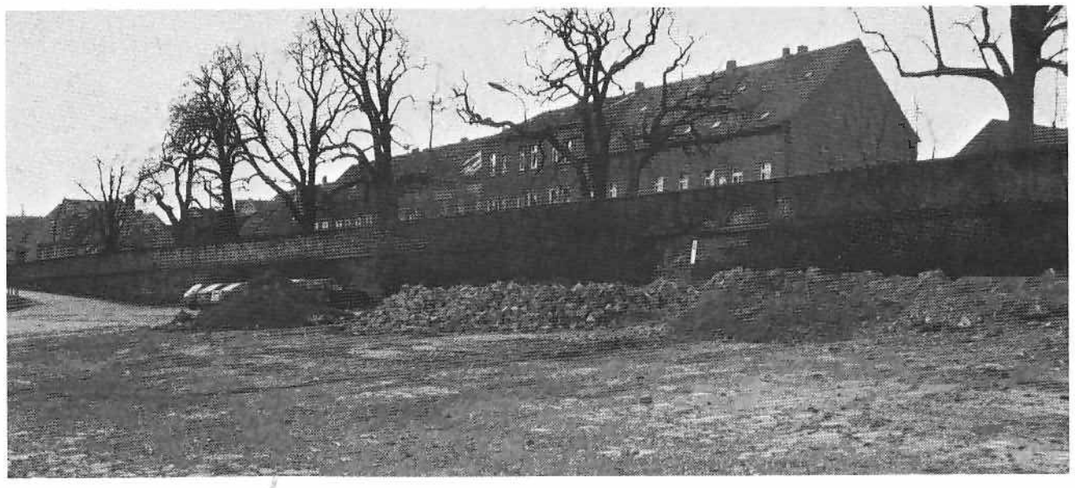
Left: In the courtyard of the Brückenkopf, the generals pose for a formal handshake. Next to Rusakov stands Major Rogov of the 173rd Rifle Regiment, whom we earlier saw being interviewed by Ann Stringer. The young major with the glasses on the left is probably Mikhail Zhadanov, the Tass correspondent who was assigned to US First Army as liaison officer and here acted as interpreter. (USNA) *Right:* After the war, the fort was used by the Soviet Army, but today it lies derelict and empty.

Next day, April 27, the corps commanders met. Major General C. Ralph Huebner, commander of the US V Corps, arrives at the checkpoint just west of Torgau on the road from Eilenburg. Note the General's specially-adapted M8 car with custom windscreen. (USNA)

Next day, April 27, General Huebner of V Corps arrived at Torgau to conduct a second ceremony with his opposite, Major-General Gleb Baklanov of the Soviet 34th Corps. By now, a 58th Division engineer battalion had constructed a raft to carry the general and members of his staff to the east bank. There, Baklanov presented Huebner with a flag depicting the medal 'For the defence of Stalingrad'. The main ceremony took place at Werdau, a small village about a mile south-east of Torgau. In the apple-tree garden of the villa which was the Russian command post, large tables had been laid and a small wooden dancing-floor covered with carpets laid out for an open-air feast. Again, there were many toasts and general fraternisation as American officers danced with Russian female soldiers. At 1800 that same day, the American, British, and Soviet governments officially announced to the world that East and West had met on the Elbe at Torgau. In Moscow, 324 guns fired a 24-shot salute at 1900 to celebrate the occasion.

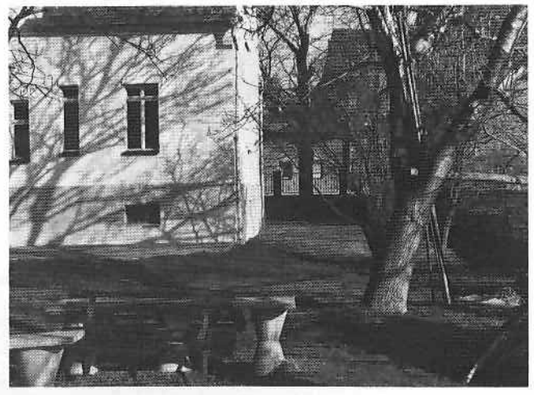


The motorcade has driven down the river slipway (visible on the aerial on page 15) where a ferry is now available. (Sovfoto)



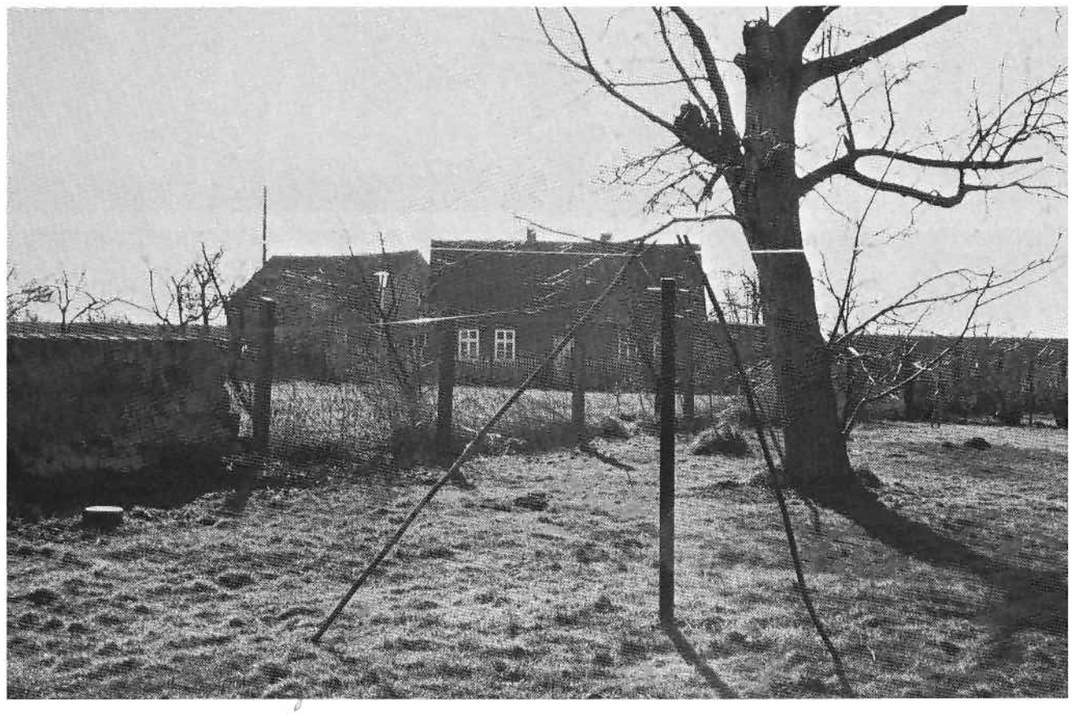
Right: **Huebner meets Major-General Gleb Baklanov of the Soviet 34th Guards Corps. Reinhardt (left) and Rusakov (between the corps commanders) now take second place. Note that Huebner wears a black ribbon round his shoulder strap as a token of mourning for US President Franklin D. Roosevelt who had died 15 days before. Baklanov, who had commanded a division at Stalingrad, described Huebner as 'about 60, tall, lean, with a weather-beaten face and large yellowish teeth'. Huebner and his party were then driven to Werdau, a small village about a mile south-east of Torgau.** *Above:* **This was the view that welcomed the Americans. Correspondent Sergeant Eckner commented at the time in *Yank* magazine on the proliferation of Soviet banners and slogans: 'It doesn't take a second look to know the Russians are planning to stick around for a while in Germany. In our area, American flags are few and far between, but over on the Russian side almost every window of the occupied town buildings flies a red flag. The Germans in many cities have painted a vast number of inspirational mottoes on the walls of houses and public buildings, but none can quite measure up in concise impact to this Soviet slogan lettered in white on red banners flying in the street here: "Death to the Fascist aggressors!"**

A banquet was laid on in the back garden of the Russian HQ villa at No. 18 Werdau. Iris Carpenter of the *Daily Express* interviews General Baklanov (right) with the help of a captain interpreter. Major Mikhail Zhadanov, the interpreter at the

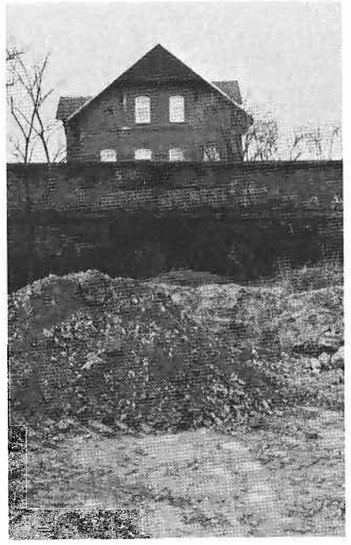


Reinhardt/Rusakov meeting of the day before, stands by (behind Carpenter). Carpenter, Ann Stringer of UPI and Lee Carson of International News Service were together dubbed 'The Rhine Maidens' by the US military. (USNA)

Above: **Another of the classic images which epitomised the US-Soviet link-up. Beforehand, General Baklanov had worried whether the cooks would be able to produce a good meal and whether there would be enough seats for everyone: 'Soon, however, I heard that expressive American "Oh!" and admiring exclamations as the famous Ukrainian borsch was being served and the guests were tasting their first spoonfuls. Siberian pelmeni (dumplings) were served after the first course.' After dinner came the dancing. The Russians have decorated Roosevelt's portrait with a mourning ribbon. (USNA)** *Below:* **The present owner of the house, Hans-Eberhard Tischmann, very kindly allowed us to match the pictures taken in his garden. The tree still stands but the area is much narrower than the 1945 picture suggests.**



General Baklanov: 'The dinner was nearly over when the Americans mentioned our T-34 tank. Praising its performance, they asked us a few technical questions about it. So I offered to show them the tank, and we all set off for the adjoining estate.' *Above:* **Tech/5 Braun pictured his colleague of the 165th Signal Photographic Company, Tech/5 Fred Poinsett (who took the picture of Huebner and Baklanov on page 33), as he poses with the Russian crew. (USNA)** *Below:* **The right-hand barn has been demolished, but its roof outline is still visible. Herr Tischmann's villa stands on the far left.**

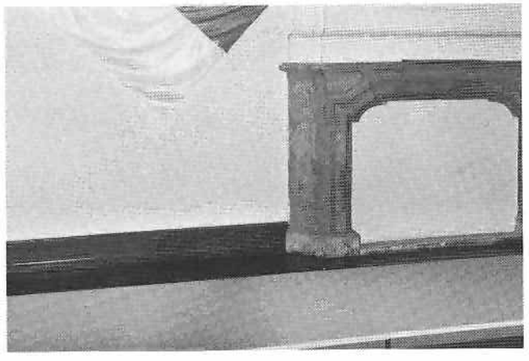


Then, on April 30, Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges of First Army travelled to Torgau for the meeting of the army commanders. Waiting on the Elbe slipway to escort him across the river were General Baklanov of 34th Corps and his captain interpreter. Hodges, too, wears the mourning ribbon on his shoulder strap. (USNA)

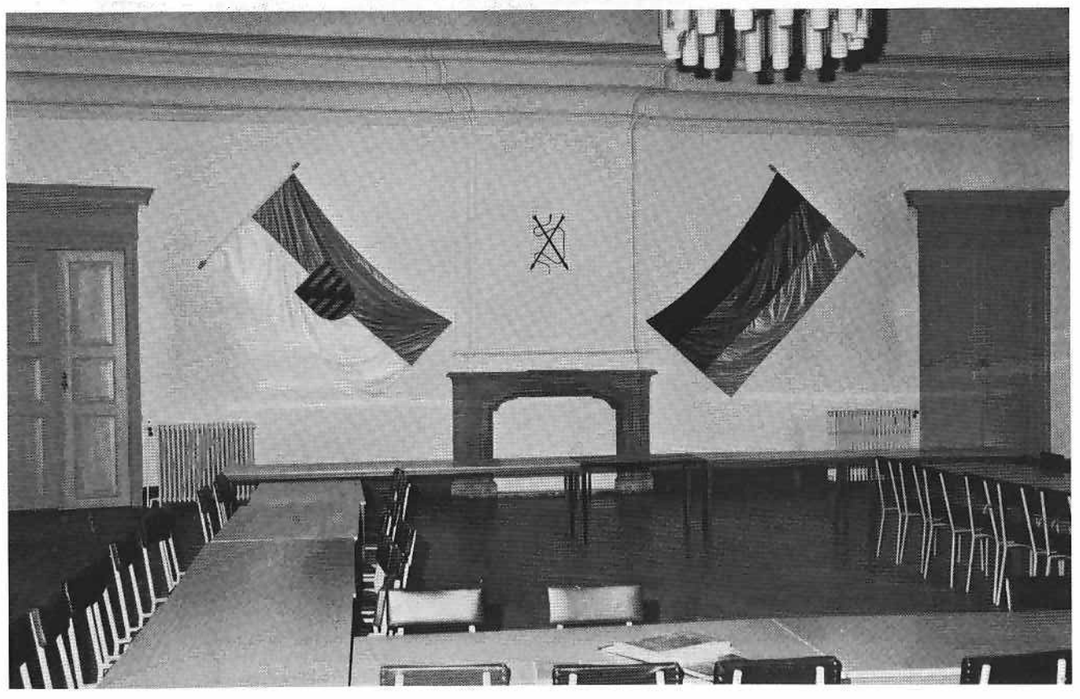
Three days later on April 30, there was yet another ceremony as Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges of the US First Army met Colonel-General Alexei Zhadov, the commander of the Fifth Guards Army. Hodges was first welcomed by General Baklanov of the 34th Corps on the river slipway at Torgau. After crossing to the east bank, the party travelled to the village of Graditz, some three miles south-east of Torgau beyond Werdau, where there was a large stud-farm which had been taken over by the Russians as a headquarters. Here, a lavish banquet was laid on in the large hall on the first floor of the main building. The Fifth Army's amateur dance company gave a performance of Russian folk songs and dances. Hodges presented Zhadov with an American flag which had been carried by American troops from America to Britain and from Normandy to the Elbe, and a specially fitted Jeep. In return, he, too, received the Stalingrad medal plus an engraved Russian TT pistol. In his speech, General Zhadov said: 'On this long-awaited, happy day, when the armies of two great nations have met on the Elbe, we are proud of our alliance and our gallant fighting men.'

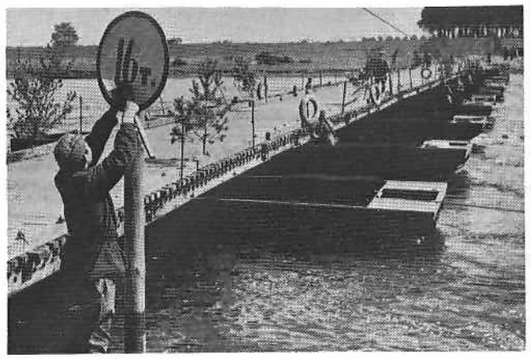
The meeting took place at the village of Graditz, five kilometres south-east of Torgau, in the Preussische Hauptgestüt, one of the largest stud-farms in Germany. From April 14-20, it had served as the command post of the XLVIII. Panzerkorps of General Max von Edelsheim, but by the time the Soviet Army arrived on the 24th, the valuable breeding horses had been evacuated to west of the Elbe. (They were later seized by the Russians and disappeared without a trace.)

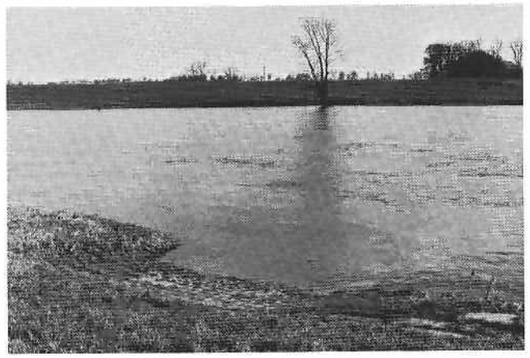
A toast to victory and friendship. General Zhadov wrote of Hodges: 'He was middle-aged — reserved, reticent, with an austere look about him. I found out later that he was also kindhearted. Our conversations convinced me that he was a gifted military leader. His every gesture and word betrayed his joy over the victory.' (USNA)



Above: **The banquet was held in the hall on the first floor of the main building of the stud-farm. Colonel-General Alexei Zhadov of the Fifth Guards Army sits below the mirror with Hodges to his right. To Zhadov's left are Major General Bill Kean, First Army Chief-of-Staff; an unidentified Russian major-general; General Baklanov; and Brigadier General Charles E. Hart, First Army Artillery Officer. For this occasion, the Russians have found a larger portrait of Roosevelt than the one at Werdau. (USNA)** *Below:* **Herr Steffen Bothendorf, present-day director of the Hauptgestüt, was quite excited when we showed him the wartime photographs as he had not seen them before, and he gladly allowed us to match them.**

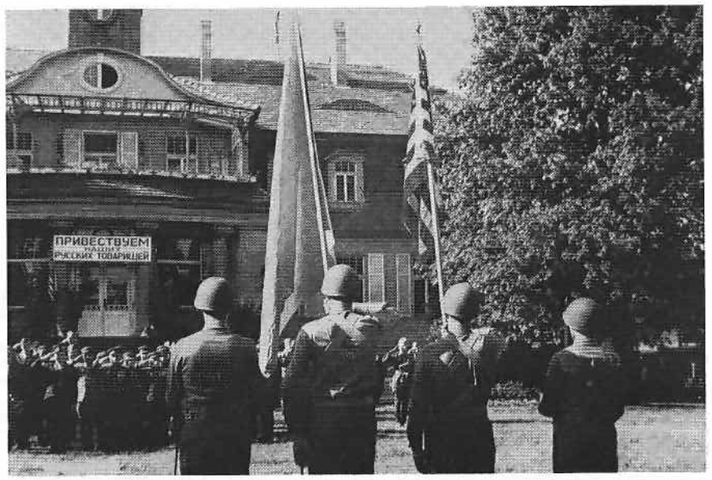






Finally, came the meeting of the army group commanders. On May 5, General Omar N. Bradley of the 12th Army Group crossed through the Russian lines to meet Marshal Ivan Koniev of the 1st Ukrainian Front. By then, Bradley could use a pontoon bridge which the Russians had built across the Elbe linking Torgau with the Brückenkopf. (IWM)

Finally, on May 5, the last meeting of the generals took place when General Bradley of the US 12th Army Group met Marshal Koniev of the Russian 1st Ukrainian Front at the latter's headquarters some 40 kilometres north-east of Torgau. Flying out from Kassel to Leipzig, Bradley and his staff then motored to Torgau and across a newly-built Russian pontoon bridge to the villa which was Koniev's CP. In a private meeting, Bradley gave Koniev a map showing the disposition of every US division. Koniev did not reciprocate but, pointing to Czechoslovakia, asked how far the US forces intended to go. Bradley said they would stop at Pilsen. When he said he was willing to help in the capture of Prague, Koniev declined the offer with a friendly smile. There followed the usual banquet — more lavish at each higher echelon of command — with speeches and toasts. After dinner, in another hall, the Song and Dance Company of the 1st Ukrainian Front sang the two national anthems, followed by American and Russian folk songs and Ukrainian and Russian folk dances. Bradley honoured Koniev with an American decoration and received a Red



General Huebner (on the left with two stars) participated in the review ceremonies outside Koniev's headquarters. All that is known about its location is that it was situated in a large mansion some 40 kilometres north-east of Torgau but, despite extensive enquiries and covering over 300 miles examining every conceivable town and village, we drew a blank.

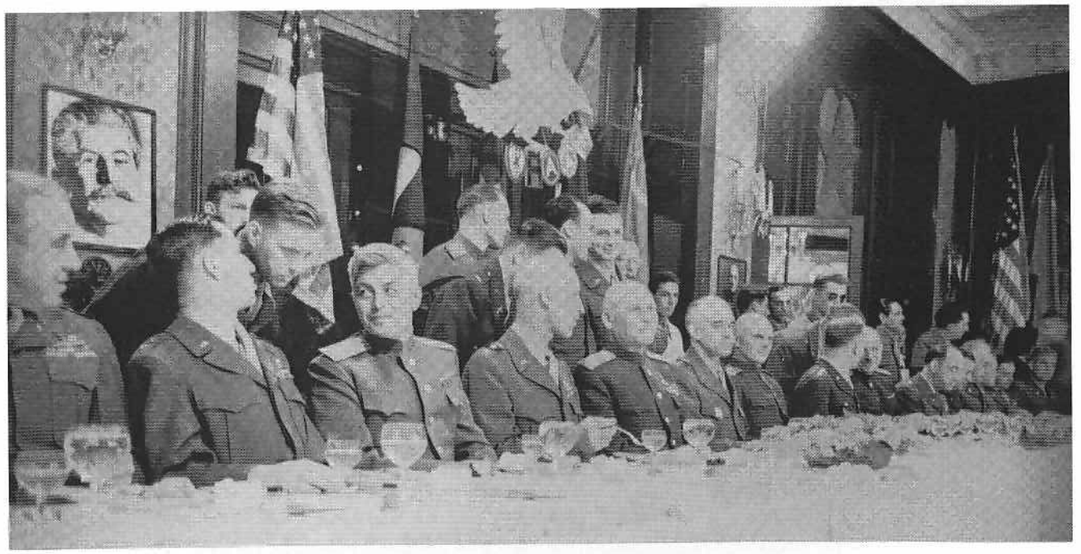
Marshal Koniev: 'I had prepared a personal present for Bradley, notably a horse which had followed me everywhere since the summer of 1943 when I assumed the command of the Steppe Front. It was a handsome, well-trained Don stallion, and I presented it to Bradley with all its harness. It seemed to me Bradley was sincerely pleased with the present' (USNA)

Army banner in return. The party having moved to the garden, Koniev presented Bradley with a Don Caucasus stallion whose saddle blanket bore a Red Army star, and a handsomely-carved Russian pistol. In turn, Bradley gave the marshal a Jeep. This ended the formal meeting.

During May, the Russian commanders paid return visits to their American counterparts, Baklanov going to Major General J. Lawton Collins (whose VII Corps had relieved Heubner's V Corps) at Leipzig, Zhadov to Hodges at Weimar, and Koniev to Bradley at Kassel.

Meanwhile, late on May 3, the Soviets had begun to cross the Elbe in force in order to occupy the area between the Elbe and Mulde. The move was according to the agreements, but the Soviets had not given out a prior warning to the 272nd Infantry, which was still guarding the Eilenburg-Torgau corridor, and the latter had to take some swift action to prevent night clashes between friendly forces. The Soviet force was from the 395th Division, 54th Corps, 13th Army — transferred here straight from the Battle of Berlin. On May 6, the 272nd was officially relieved by the Russians and withdrawn back across the Mulde.

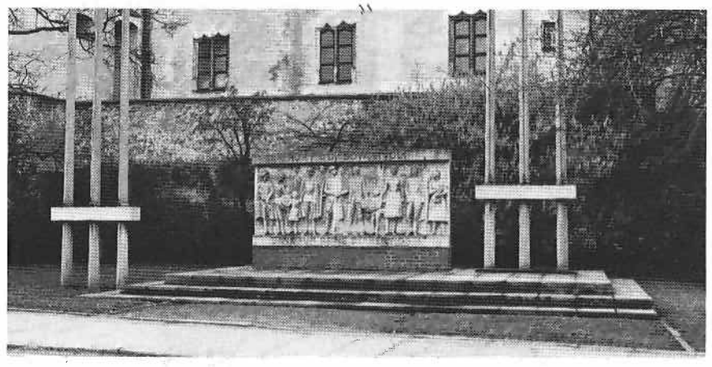
General Bradley: 'Anticipating this exchange of gifts, I had carried along in the rear of the *Mary Q* [Bradley's C-47] a new Jeep just unloaded from Antwerp. Across the cowling we had painted in both English and Russian: "To the Commander of the 1st Ukrainian Army Group from Soldiers of the 1st, 3rd, 9th and 15th Armies of the 12th Army Group". A holster was affixed to the Jeep with a brightly polished new carbine. And we stuffed the tool compartment with American cigarettes.' (USNA)



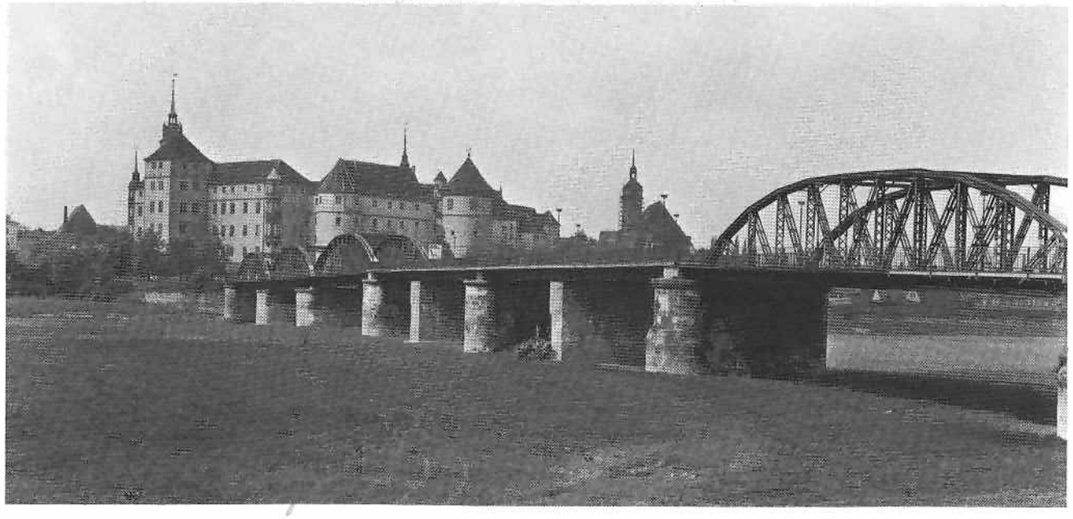
On May 17, Koniev and his staff paid a return visit to Bradley's headquarters at Kassel. The Marshal (centre) is flanked by Bradley and (talking to the interpreter) Lieutenant General Bill Simpson of US Ninth Army. (Novosti)

After the war, Torgau fell within the Soviet zone and, between June and September 1945, the Soviets built a memorial to the link-up beside the Elbe. Known as the Denkmal der Begegnung, it was designed by the Russian architect Milezky.

After the war, the memory of the US-Soviet link-up was kept alive largely as the result of the efforts of one man, a simple cab driver from Chicago. Joseph Polowsky had been an original member of the Kotzebue patrol. As Kotzebue and his men had met the Russians on the east bank of the Elbe at Lorenzkirch amid the charred bodies of German refugees, the soldiers of both sides, deeply moved by the scene of carnage around them, had pledged to do all they could to prevent another world war in the future. Joe Polowsky was one of those who could not forget the 'Oath of the Elbe' and in 1947, he abandoned botany studies at the University of Chicago to lead what was often a penniless, one-man crusade against the Cold War. The United Nations had been founded at San Francisco on the very same day of the Elbe link-up — April 25, 1945 — and Polowsky regarded this as more than symbolic coincidence. In 1949-50, and for years afterwards, he unsuccessfully lobbied the UN to have April 25 officially recognised as 'Elbe Day', an international day for peace.



Across the road stands another memorial inscribed 'Glory to the Soviet people — Gratitude for its deliverance'. Local people feel the relief by sculptor Karl Voigt of Russian soldiers hand in hand with civilians gives a distorted view as all of Torgau had been evacuated by the time the Red Army arrived.

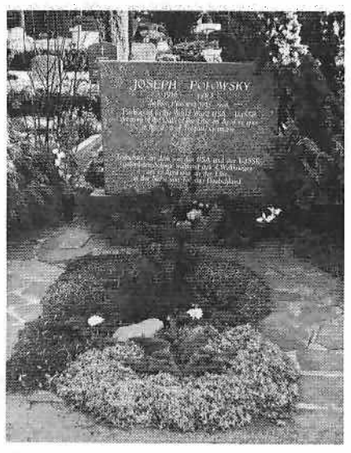


Throughout the Cold War, withstanding ridicule and accusations of being a fellow-traveller, he strove to build friendship between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1950, he founded what he called the 'Peace River' organisation. In 1955, he visited Moscow with eight other Elbe veterans for a first reunion with Russian veterans. Russian veterans paid a return visit to the US in 1958. Polowsky's first return visit to Torgau was in 1960. He also met the Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev. The Soviet and East German authorities fully exploited the propaganda possibilities of such contacts, but he remained an idealist notwithstanding. Regarded by many as a dreamer, he campaigned tirelessly for a reduction of nuclear arms in the world, writing open letters to many world leaders. For the last ten years of his life, he would stand every April 25 — often alone — on Chicago's Michigan Avenue bridge urging passers-by to join him in renewing the Oath of the Elbe. When told he was dying of cancer, he announced his wish to be buried in Torgau as a symbol of reconciliation between East and West. He died on October 17, 1983 not knowing whether the East German authorities would agree to his request. Embarrassed with the situation, the East Germans decided to give in and he was buried at Torgau on November 26, the coffin being carried to the grave by a small delegation of US and Soviet veterans. Although the GDR authorities, fearful of demonstrations, had made no prior announcement of the funeral and tried to keep the population away, small clusters of townspeople managed to witness the ceremony.

After the war, Chicago cab driver Joe Polowsky, an original member of the Kotzebue patrol (see page 11), devoted his entire life to his ideal of the 'Oath of the Elbe'. Against much scorn and accusations of being a communist, he tirelessly campaigned for peace and understanding between East and West. *Above:* **His first post-war visit to the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Torgau was in 1960. (M. Bräunlich)**

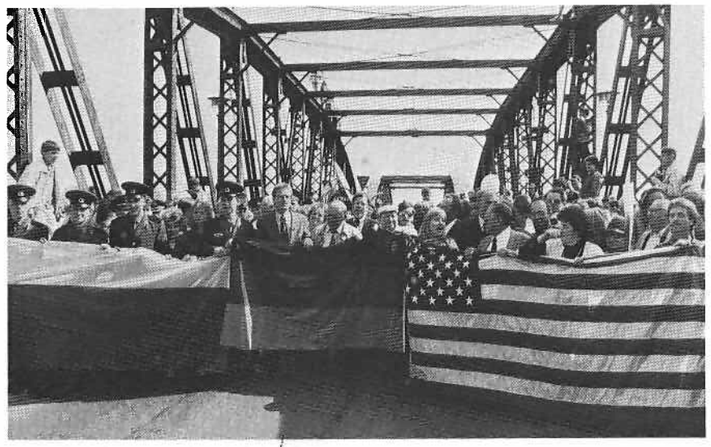
MEMBERS OF THE KOTZEBUE PATROL

1st Lt Albert L. Kotzebue	Co G	Houston, Texas	Pfc Emmett P. Thompson	Co G	Merkel, Texas
T/Sgt Frederick W. Johnston	Co G	Bradford, Penn.	Pfc John B. Adam, Jr	Co H	Rockingham, N.C.
S/Sgt Alfred E. Aronson	Co G	New York, N.Y.	Pfc Charles G. Attara	Co H	Patterson, N.C.
S/Sgt William E. Weisel	Hq Co 2nd Bn	Norwood, Ohio	Pfc Jesse W. Best	Co H	Grampian, Penn.
Sgt John J. Peters	Co H	Brooklyn, N.Y.	Pfc James R. Gilmore	Co H	Great Bend, Kansas
Sgt Jack B. Tyson	Co H	Columbia, Va.	Pfc Robert Haag	Co H	Washington, Ind.
Cpl Stephen A. Kowalski	Med Det	New York, N.Y.	Pfc Rudolph Hoyos	Co H	Los Angeles, Calif.
Cpl Christopher R. Twardzik	Co H	Shonandock, Penn.	Pfc Edwin Jeary	Co H	Detroit, Mich.
Cpl Melvin Roseland	Co H	Senca, S.D.	Pfc William Matousek	Co H	Glendale, Calif.
T/5 Robert D. Stuart	Hq Co 2nd Bn	Scranton, Texas	Pfc Harold B. Pemberton	Co H	Fort Worth, Texas
Pfc Nicholas Supron	Hq Co 2nd Bn	Scranton, Texas	Pfc Otha N. Phillips	Co H	Quitman, La.
Pfc Harold R. Brummel	Co G	Lee's Summit, Mo.	Pfc Carl L. Robinson	Co H	Lancaster, S.C.
Pfc Joseph W. Johnson	Co G	Excelsior, Mich.	Pfc Edward P. Ruff	Co H	Riverside, N.Y.
Pfc James W. Kane, Jr	Co G	Overbrook Hill, Penn.	Pfc Charles H. Sohulta	Co H	Dubuque, Ia
Pfc Joseph P. Polowsky	Co G	S Minneapolis, Minn.	Pfc John Wheeler	Co H	Winstead, Conn.
Pfc Van D. Rye	Co G	Clarksville, Tenn.	Pvt Robert S. Legal	Co H	Georgetown, Mass.
Pfc Byron L. Shiver, Sr	Co G	Lakeland, Fla.	Pvt Peter M. Calasciona	Co G	Los Angeles, Calif.
Pfc J. P. Thomas	Co G	Blue Springs, Miss.	Pvt Larry Hamlin	Co G	Towaoc, Colorado

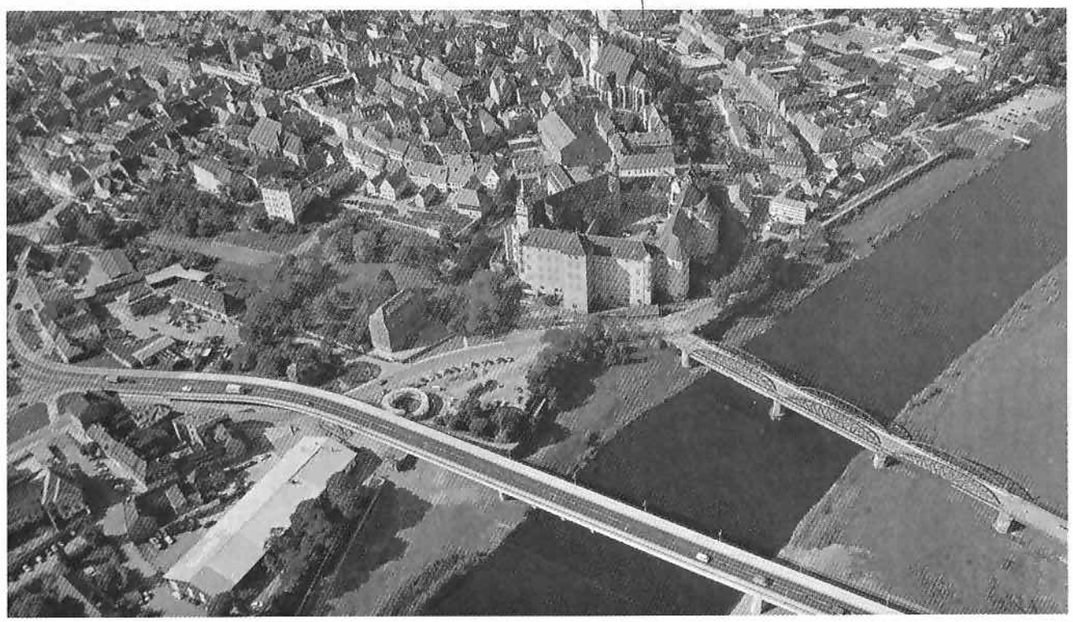


In 1983, dying of cancer, Polowsky expressed a desire to be buried at Torgau. Initially, the GDR authorities kept silent, but they yielded shortly after his death, and he was interred in the municipal cemetery on November 26, 1983. (H. Dargelis)

The 40th anniversary of the link-up in April 1985 was still GDR-orchestrated, but, since the German reunification in October 1990, 'Elbe Day' has gained an entire new lease of life and is now an established yearly event on the Torgau calendar. The climax of the 'Down by the River' music festival has every time been the meeting of East and West on the historic road bridge. In 1992, Bill Robertson, together with Joe Polowsky's widow Marie, daughter Irene, and son-in-law Russ, carried the US flag. (E. Bräunlich)



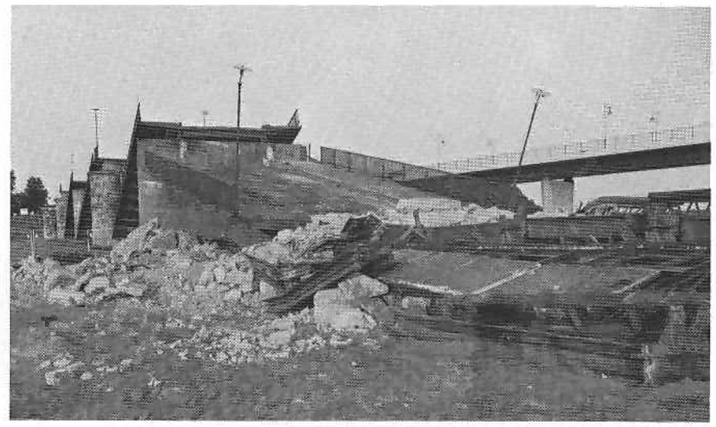
On April 25, 1985, on the 40th anniversary of the Elbe link-up, a large group of US and Soviet veterans met at Torgau. Prior announcements of the reunion had led to debates among veteran organisations and politicians in the western camp but, in spite of its controversial character and the obvious propaganda exploitation by the Communist block, the meeting itself, widely covered by media of both East and West, was a success.

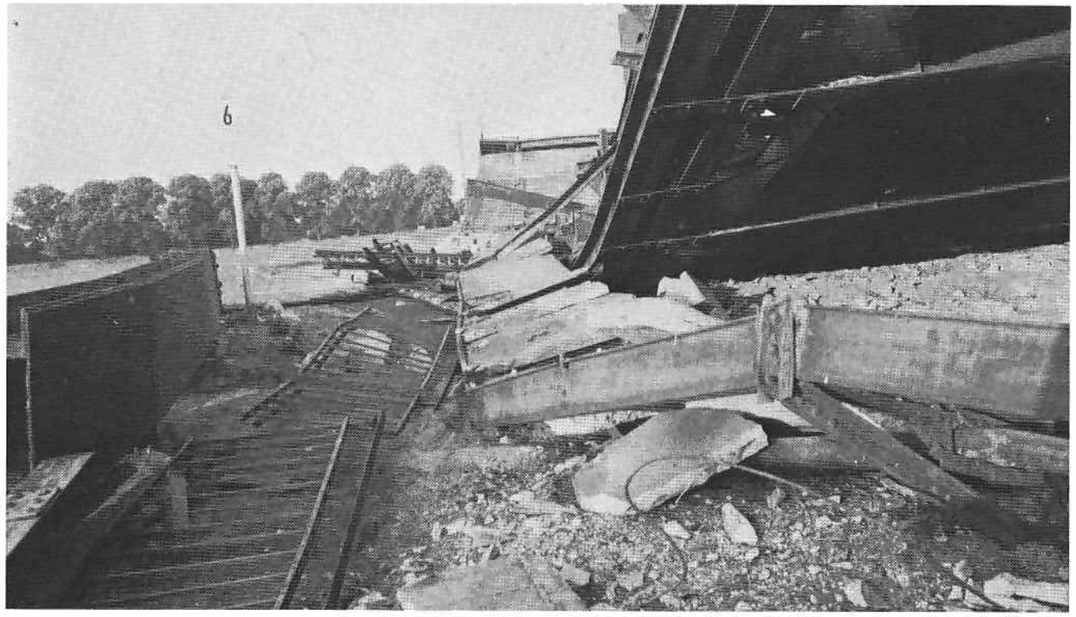


The GDR had already prepared plans for the construction of a new road bridge at Torgau and these were taken over by the Bonn government as part of their modernisation plan for former East Germany. *Right:* **In July 1993, Bill Robertson came over from the States to meet once again with Alexander Silvashko and re-enact their famous handshake at the dedication of the new river crossing. (M. Bräunlich) The following year, the 'Elbe Day' march also encompassed the new bridge** *(above)*, **sited just a few metres upstream from the old one.**

With the demise of the GDR and after the reunification of Germany in 1990, the idea of 'Elbe Day' was revived by a group of Torgau civilians who founded the Förderverein Europa-Begegnungen (Association for European Meetings). Since 1991, they have each April organised an international 'Down by the Riverside' meeting. Essentially a music festival with jazz and dixieland orchestras and army bands from all countries playing on the banks of the Elbe, a yearly climax each time was the meeting of US and Russian veterans on the Elbe bridge.

Then, in June 1994, Torgau made a short appearance in the international press when the historic road bridge was suddenly and without prior announcement to the local population, blown up by the German authorities. A new bridge had been completed a year earlier (Robertson and Silvashko had been invited to Torgau for its opening on July 8, 1993), but many townspeople had hoped the old bridge could be saved for historic and touristic reasons. Coming so close after the 50th anniversary of D-Day, and less than a year before that of the link-up itself, many considered that the removal was politically-inspired. However, the Bonn government defended the decision saying that the river-bed pier of the old bridge had long been known to be an obstacle to Elbe traffic; that the cost of preserving the decaying structure (estimated at DM 10 million, i.e. some £3.3 million) would be prohibitive; and that the blown span on which the actual link-up had occurred had been cleared away when the bridge was repaired in 1945-46.





Three months later, on June 16, 1994, the old bridge was blown. The 'Elbe Day' organising committee and the townspeople had not been notified of the demolition and were thus faced with a fait accompli. As soon as we heard that the bridge had been blown — for the second time in its history — we asked Anthony Bethel to photograph the remains for us *(top and above)*. **In many ways, it was a striking parallel to what had happened to that other historic span, Pegasus bridge in Normandy, the removal of which on the eve of the 50th anniversary of D-Day had created a similar uproar the previous year.** *Right:* **All that remains today is the abutment of the western pier (compare with page 18).**

By the time we come off the press, the 50th anniversary of the link-up will have passed. The programme at Torgau, apart from the usual music festival, will include a re-enactment of Robertson's patrol from Wurzen to Torgau, meetings of veterans, a multi-media open-air spectacle, exhibitions, historical seminars, film showings, etc. At Strehla, a memorial will be unveiled to at last give proper credit to the Kotzebue patrol link-up.

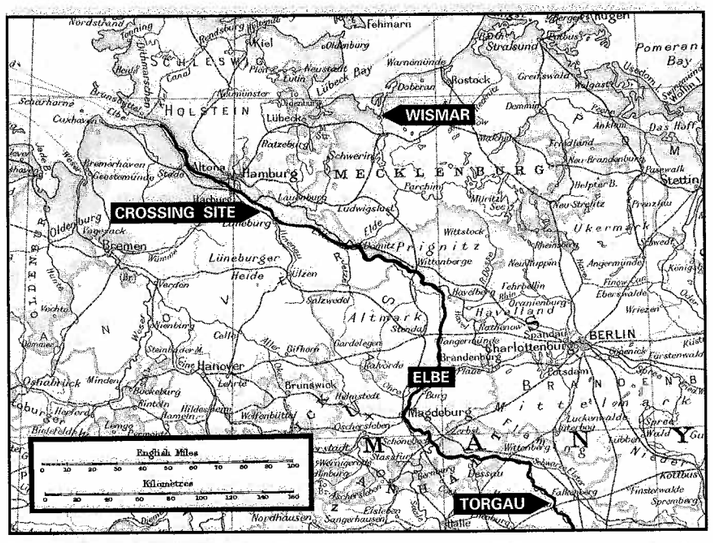
THE BRITISH-SOVIET LINK-UP

By Karel Margry

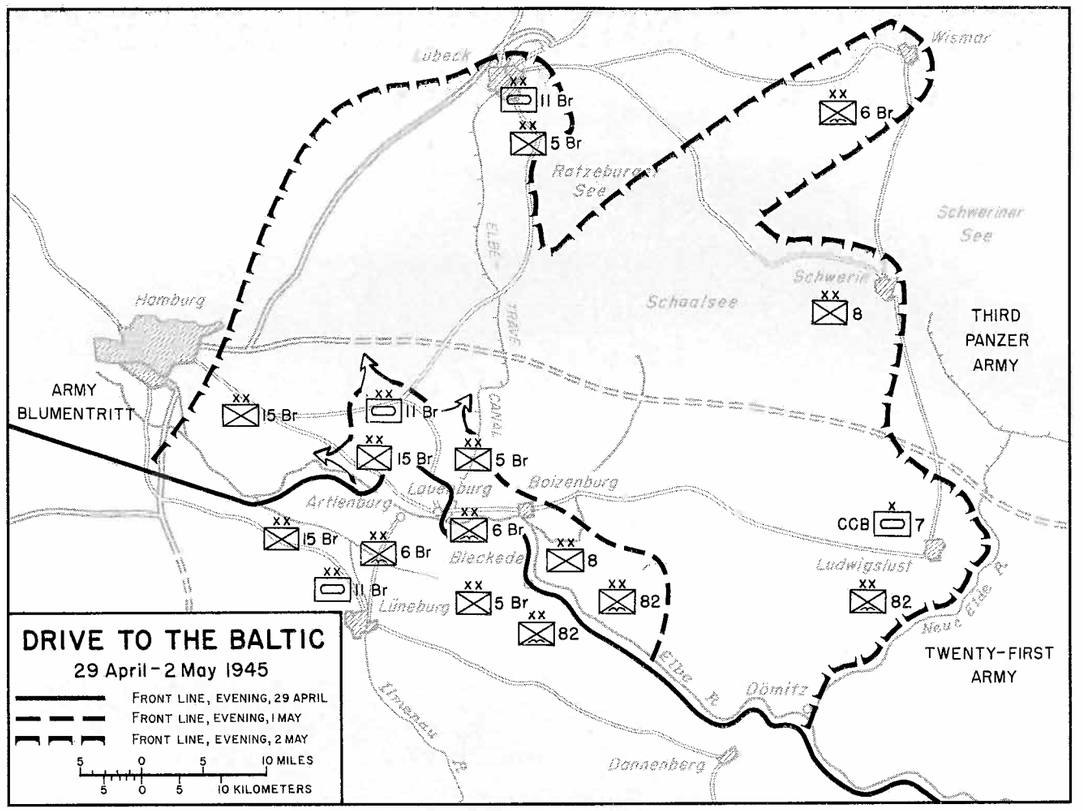
Whereas the US-Soviet link-up on the Elbe was mainly a delicate tactical operation to avoid the two Allies clashing with each other, the British-Soviet link-up on the Baltic, which occurred a week later, was governed by real military-strategic and political considerations and, as a result, had all the characteristics of a race as to who would arrive there first.

About mid-April, General Eisenhower ordered the British 21st Army Group to advance to the Baltic shore as quickly as possible. His object was to seal off Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark, partly in order to cut off the German forces there, partly to intercept the mass of fugitives which was pouring out of Mecklenburg before the Red Army, but mainly in order to prevent the approaching Soviets from advancing into Denmark. To accomplish this, the Allies needed to cross the lower reaches of the Elbe and advance to the Baltic port of Wismar, located at the eastern neck of the Schleswig-Holstein peninsula. Wismar lay some 35 miles within the Soviet zone of occupation as had been agreed at the Yalta Conference.

The thrust to the Baltic to forestall Russian entry into Denmark was a remarkable departure from Eisenhower's normal policy. The stated US military doctrine followed generally throughout the war was to concentrate everything on achieving military victory over the armed forces of the enemy, and not risk any lives for purely political purposes. It was for that reason that Eisenhower had halted the advance to Berlin, thus leaving the political prize of capturing the Nazi capital to the Red Army; the same reasoning had led to the decision not to advance to Prague, but instead concentrate on a thrust into Austria to deny the Germans a National Redoubt. However, and in contrast, his decision for a drive to the Baltic, resulting from a request by the British Chiefs-of-Staff, was clearly chiefly motivated by political considerations.



Top: **Tommy meets Ivan. On May 2, one week after the US-Soviet link-up, British and Red Army forces met for the first time. Greeting this Soviet tank crew just north-east out of Wismar are (L–R) Gunner R. J. Utting, Lance Bombardier E. Manley and Private R. C. Sutherland, all of 6th Airborne Division. The 6th Airborne Division was the only British unit to meet the Russians face to face. (IWM)** *Above:* **The meeting took place at Wismar on the Baltic, and was the result of SHAEF's decision to seal off Schleswig-Holstein and the Danish peninsula before the Soviets reached it. With both sides about equal distance from Wismar, this led to a race as to which side would reach the town first.**



On April 29, British Second Army had assaulted across the Elbe at Lauenburg. Another crossing was made next day at Bleckede by the US XVIII Airborne Corps, which had been attached to Second Army specifically for the push to the Baltic.

On April 30, in another explanation of his plans to the Soviets, Eisenhower noted that, in the north, he intended to clear the Baltic coast as far east as Wismar and build a line south to Schwerin, thence south-west to Doemitz on the Elbe, 23 miles downstream from Wittenberge (north of Magdeburg, not to be confused with Wittenberg south of Magdeburg). The Soviets accepted these proposals, although their armies advancing to the Elbe north of Berlin did not appear to be slowing down.

Having received Eisenhower's orders, Field-Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, the commander of 21st Army Group, on April 22 issued a new directive to the armies under his command. While the Canadian First Army (Lieutenant-General Henry Crerar) captured Oldenburg, Emden and Wilhelmshaven, British Second Army (Lieutenant-General Miles C. Dempsey) was to capture Bremen, clear the Cuxhaven peninsula, secure a bridgehead over the lower Elbe and seize Lübeck and thereby 'seal off the Schleswig peninsula as quickly as possible'. A secure flank was to be formed north of the Elbe (which flows east to west in this part of Germany), on the general line Wismar–Schwerin–Darchau.

By April 26, Second Army had reached the line of the Elbe from Wittenberge to the sea. On the right, opposite Lauenburg, was VIII Corps; in the centre, opposite Hamburg, was XII Corps; on the left, and in possession of Cuxhaven, was XXX Corps. No intact bridges had been captured.

On April 27, knowing that the Russians had invested Berlin on the 25th, Eisenhower sent Montgomery a signal urging him to speed his attack across the Elbe to the Baltic. Montgomery was not a little irritated by this, since he himself had already pleaded for a quick crossing of the Elbe a month earlier but, instead, Eisenhower had on April 3 removed the US Ninth Army from his 21st Army Group, leaving the latter too weak to keep up the tempo of operations. To replace the loss and provide assistance for the Elbe crossing, Eisenhower had on April 20 given Montgomery the US XVIII Airborne Corps of Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway with three divisions: the 82nd Airborne, 8th Infantry and 7th Armored. The corps still had to be brought up 250 miles from the Ruhr area.

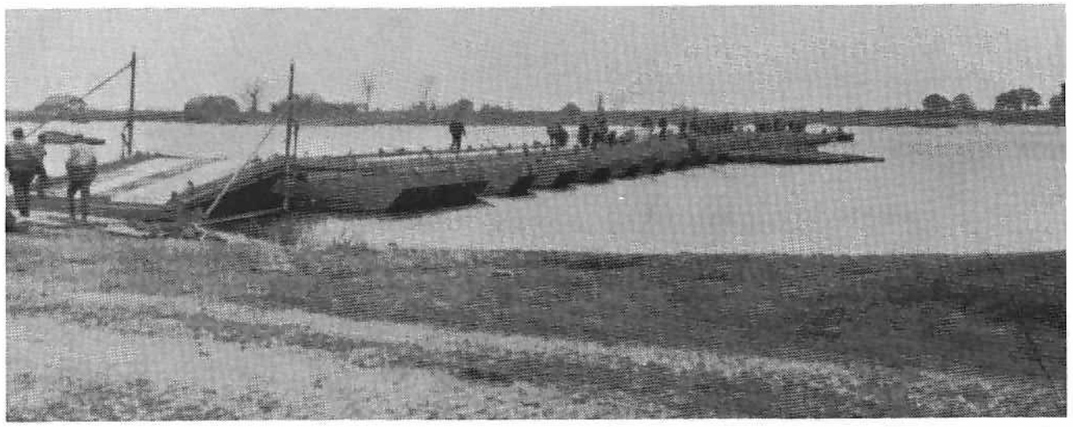
The Second Army crossing of the Elbe — Operation 'Enterprise' — was elaborately planned. The VIII Corps was to make an assault crossing, after which the British XII and American XVIII Airborne Corps were to cross into the bridgehead, the former to mask and later capture Hamburg, the latter to clear additional bridging sites further upstream and protect the right flank of VIII Corps in a northward drive to the Baltic.

The initial crossing was to be made opposite Lauenburg, some 40 miles upstream from Hamburg. First, the 15th Scottish Division, with 1st Commando Brigade under command, would assault the river and establish a foothold. Next, after bridges had been built, the 11th Armoured and 6th Airborne Divisions would cross into the bridgehead, the former to begin the drive to Lübeck, the latter to push out eastward. Once the 6th Airborne was across the Elbe-Trave Canal, it would pass to US XVIII Airborne Corps which would then assume the drive to the Baltic.

D-Day for the Elbe crossing had originally been set for the night of April 30/May 1 but because of the rapid deterioration of German forces everywhere on the Western Front, on the 26th Montgomery advanced the day of the river crossing two days, to the night of April 28/29. For the same reason, General Ridgway proposed that instead of waiting five or six days to cross British bridges, his XVIII Corps should make its own assault crossing ten miles further upstream, at Bleckede, before daylight on April 30. General Dempsey approved.

At 2 a.m. on April 29, the VIII Corps assault began. In stormy weather, the 1st Commando Brigade crossed the Elbe in Buffaloes opposite Lauenburg, and 44th Brigade did the same from Artlenburg, two miles to the west. Almost immediately, Royal Engineers of 11 AGRE began building rafts and bridges. Despite heavy shelling and mortaring, and even jet-fighter bombing of the bridging sites, a Class 9 folding-boat bridge at Lauenburg was ready in 9 hours.

The following night, the XVIII Airborne Corps made its own assault crossing at Bleckede. General Ridgway had had a problem to get an assault force ready in time. The US 8th Division had arrived from the Ruhr, but was concentrated near the British crossing sites at Lauenburg, in accordance with the original plan. Of the 82nd Airborne, only two battalions of the 505th Parachute Infantry had so far assembled near the site chosen for the American crossing at Bleckede. The rest of the division and all of the 7th Armored were still moving up. In the interest of speed, Ridgway ordered the 82nd to start the assault with the two battalions on hand. To provide a ready follow-up force, he attached four battalions of the 8th Division to the 82nd.

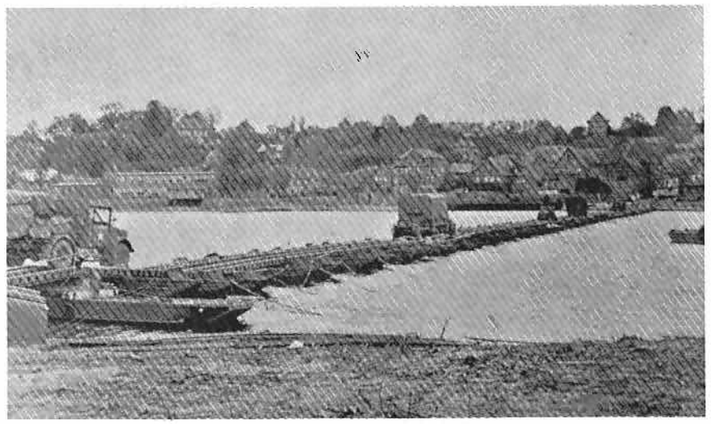


Above: **The bridge at Bleckede was built by the 1130th and 1143rd Engineer Combat Groups. The Elbe at his point is over 300 yards wide and General Ridgway chose the local ferry point for the Harry S. Truman Bridge, named in honour of the new American President.** *Bottom:* **Dave Kaufman of Chatsworth, California, whose father, Emanuel, was a medic with Company C of the 244th Engineer Combat Battalion at the bridging site, took the comparison.**

Ridgway's gamble paid off. At 1 a.m. on April 30, the 505th paratroopers crossed in assault boats and, overcoming sporadic resistance, established a bridgehead. Within a few hours, two groups of US combat engineers started building a heavy pontoon bridge. During the day, heavy shelling harassed the construction work, but the 1,184-foot bridge was ready for traffic before dark, 13 hours after work had begun.

Meanwhile, in the British bridgehead, VIII Corps sappers had completed a second bridge, a Class 40 pontoon Bailey at Artlenburg. Owing to the traffic congestion, it was evening before the tanks of the 11th Armoured Division could begin to cross, to be followed by the 5th Division. Meanwhile, the 3rd Parachute Brigade crossed at Lauenburg. Because of the congestion, the troops could only be fed piecemeal across the bridges and the tanks had priority. According to Ridgway, some paratrooper units turned their maroon berets inside out, so that their black inner linings made them look like tanker berets, and went across disguised as tankers. The rest of 6th Airborne followed and took over the eastern sector of the bridgehead as planned.

Next day, May 1, the two bridgeheads expanded rapidly. At Bleckede, four battalions of the 8th Division and an additional regiment of the 82nd Airborne attacked amid increasing indications that all resistance was about to collapse. From Lauenburg, the 3rd Parachute Brigade headed eastward to beyond Boizenburg where it linked up with the American forces. Still, during the night, American artillery persisted in shelling Boizenburg.



Ten miles downstream, 11th Army Group Royal Engineers, constructed a Class 9 FBE (folding boat) bridge at Lauenburg within nine hours of first surveying the site.

By the end of this second day (May 1), the British and American bridgeheads were some six miles deep and firmly linked. Additional bridges were in operation on both flanks, the British 7th Armoured Division crossing at Geesthacht on the left and the US 7th Armored at Darchau on the right.

On May 2, General Matt Ridgway of the XVIII Airborne Corps ordered two of his divisions — British 6th Airborne and US 8th Infantry — to break out from the bridgehead to the north-east, to Wismar and Schwerin respectively, and beat the Soviets to the Baltic. Here, artillery officers of both divisions confer on the road to Wismar. (IWM)

The 6th Airborne Division (Major-General Eric Bols) now passed to the command of the American corps to form its left wing. That evening, General Ridgway arrived to give his orders. The entire division was to advance with all haste to the town of Wismar on the Baltic coast. It was to arrive there before the Soviets in order to prevent them from entering Denmark. The division was given troop-carrying trucks of the RASC and the support of the tanks of the Royal Scots Greys (2nd Dragoons) of 4th Armoured Brigade, and told to get there in 12 hours.

Leading the advance was the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion mounted on the tanks of C Squadron of the Royal Scots Greys. Driving at top speed, the column covered the 40 miles to Wismar in record time, beating the Soviets by just two hours. Here, a Honey light recce tank of the Scots Greys enters Wismar. (IWM)

Brigadier Nigel Poett's 5th Parachute had been assigned to lead the advance, but Brigadier James Hill of the 3rd Parachute Brigade had other ideas, determined as he was that his brigade would reach Wismar first. When the division set off on the morning of May 2, the two brigades advanced along separate routes in a headlong dash to Gadebusch which was 20 miles to the south-west of Wismar. From that town, there was only a single route to Wismar and whichever brigade reached Gadebusch first would have won the race to Wismar.

Brigadier Hill ordered the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion of Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser Eadie to take the lead. Eadie in turn ordered his B Company, commanded by Major Stan Waters, to mount the Sherman tanks of C Squadron of the Scots Greys and spearhead the advance. As Eadie recalled: 'I followed immediately behind Stan's tank in my Jeep. Stan Waters was a Calgary boy. His cowboy instincts took over and he drove the tanks on at maximum speed so that we cleared Wittenburg by 9 a.m.' One Canadian paratrooper remarked: 'I never realised that a Sherman could do 60 miles an hour'. After Wittenburg, the force pushed on to Lützow. Here, the tanks refuelled and the dash continued. There were the occasional pockets of resistance, but these were met with shellfire from the tanks as they advanced.

Both 3rd and 5th Parachute Brigades were held up by streams of refugees on the roads, but, in the end, 3rd Brigade got to Gadebusch first. In their dash, the Scots Greys and

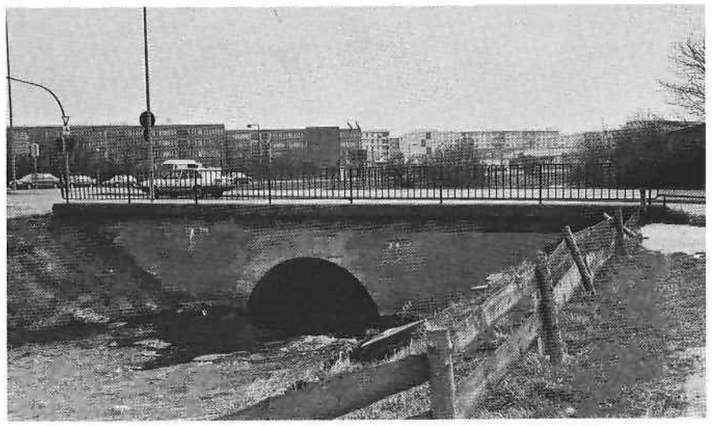
On May 2, demoralised by the news of Hitler's death, the German army's will to fight disappeared completely. Advancing Allied troops virtually met no opposition. That day, in the XII Corps sector, the British 7th Armoured Division outside Hamburg began negotiations for the surrender of the city. In the VIII Corps sector, the 11th Armoured entered Lübeck without a fight, and the 5th Division closed up in the area behind them. In the XVIII Airborne Corps sector, the 82nd Airborne, with a combat command of the US 7th Armored Division in support, moved east to Ludwigslust and south-east along the Elbe to Doemitz to anchor the 21st Army Group's right flank on the line Eisenhower had specified to the Soviets. The US 8th Division drove 45 miles to the north-east to occupy Schwerin. And the 6th Airborne Division, with the Sherman tanks of Royal Scots Greys, dashed all the way to Wismar on the Baltic.

Many of the medieval and renaissance houses of the old Hanseatic port of Wismar have survived until the present day: this is Diebstrasse, just off the town square.

Left: **The same tank wheels up the market place, while a truckload of Luftwaffe soldiers, no doubt glad to be able to surrender to British troops, looks on. (IWM)** *Right:* **Until 1990, Wismar lay in the German Democratic Republic. The characteristic fountain pavilion, the Wasserkunst, built between 1579-1602, was restored by the GDR authorities in 1972-76.**

Canadians drove past formations of fully-armed troops lining the roads as the tanks thundered past. Describing the taking of Gadebusch, the Greys' war diary noted: 'From now onwards for the rest of the day, prisoners-of-war continued to stream one way while we streamed the other. In many cases, the Germans were in their own mechanical transport and in one case a Mark III was observed in the prisoner-of-war column.' The Canadians' war diary recorded: 'All resistance had collapsed because the Germans wanted us to go as far as possible. They reasoned that the more territory we occupied, the less the Russians could occupy. Thousands of German troops lined the road and crowded the villages, some cheering us on, though most were a despondent-looking mob.'

At the end of the road lay Wismar. The Canadians and Scots Greys entered this picturesque medieval town, once a Hansa city, in the early afternoon of May 2. Some resistance was encountered at a road-block where enemy troops had dug in, but this was quickly overcome by B Company who dismounted and cleared the position whilst the Greys shot their way through the blockade. At the entrance to the town, Lieutenant-Colonel Eadie received confirmation from a freed Canadian PoW that there was no fight left in the town garrison. Proceeding through Wismar, the Canadians quickly seized the bridges on the eastern side of the town. Companies were dispersed to ensure Wismar was completely in Allied hands. In the harbour, they spotted nine German destroyers and five submarines, but the paratroopers had no means of shooting up these vessels and they all escaped. There was little opposition, although the tanks did some firing at the aerodrome at Haffeld to the north of the town, which belonged to the Dornier aircraft factory.



As soon as they arrived, 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion occupied the bridges across the Wallensteingraben canal on the east side of Wismar and the roads leading east out of the town. This is the bridge on Poeler Strasse.

Left: **About a mile further up the Poel road, they set up a barrier across the road here to mark the British demarcation line.** *Above:* **Unbelievably after 50 years, the house still carries painted evidence that this was the headquarters of No. 4 Platoon.**

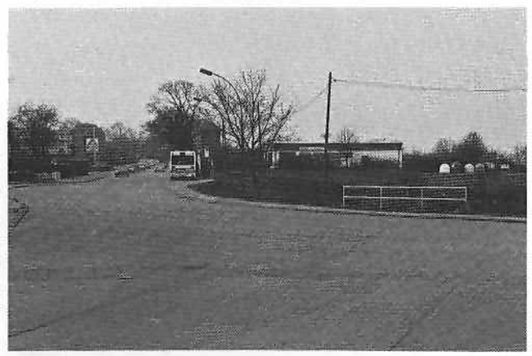
Left: **A mile further on, having lost the race to Wismar, the Soviets put up their barrier. In between lay the small suburb of Schwanzenbusch, a no man's land where the two forces could fraternise. Here, soldiers of both sides pose with the ubiquitous Russian accordion.** *Right:* **In the garden next door, the crew of a Soviet armoured car enjoys British cigarettes. (IWM)**

By mid-afternoon, the rest of the 3rd Parachute Brigade had also arrived. The 6th Airborne had covered 40 miles in one day. It had also been the Scots Greys' longest charge in the war.

At 4 p.m., the first Russians were met when C Company of the Canadian battalion, which was covering the bridges on the eastern side of the town, encountered a Russian patrol. A Soviet officer arrived 'in a Jeep, with his driver'. He had no idea that Allied forces were in Wismar until he came to the Canadian barrier. 'He had come far in advance of his own columns and was quite put out to find us sitting on what was the Russians' ultimate objective', recorded the battalion diarist.

Brigadier Hill sent out Lieutenant-Colonel Napier Crookenden, the CO of his 9th Parachute Battalion, to make contact with the Soviets. Accompanied by two Russian-speaking sergeants from the Canadian battalion and flying a large white flag made out of a sheet, Crookenden set off in a Jeep to the east. After a few miles, they met the leading column of Soviet tanks. Explaining who they were, Crookenden asked to see the senior officer. While he was in conversation with this Russian through his interpreters, another armoured column, with troops riding on the decks, sped past him towards Wismar. Crookenden jumped into his Jeep, calling out to the Soviet officer to join him, and went after the tanks in hot pursuit. After a hair-raising chase, with the Red Army officer gripping his arm in a state of panic, he caught up with them. Driving the Jeep half in and half out of the ditch, he managed to overtake the tanks, just as they reached the outskirts of the town at a point where the Canadians had set up a troop of 17-pounder anti-tank guns pointing down the road.

It took some time to find them, but both houses still stand unchanged, at Poeler Strasse 111 and 109.



Another 500 yards further down the road, at the turn-off to Müggenburg where the Russian main force was dug in. a 6th Airborne RASC lance-corporal shows his Sten gun to a Soviet tanker. The view is back towards Wismar. (IWM)

Several meetings were necessary to straighten out the details of the demarcation boundary. *Left:* **Here, Lieutenant P. C. Insole of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, the liaison officer (with back to camera), meets a Soviet major and his staff on May 3. The lieutenant on the right is the Canadian interpreter.** *Right:* **Also present was the Soviet lieutenant-colonel in charge of all Soviet troops in the area, and his female interpreter. (IWM)**

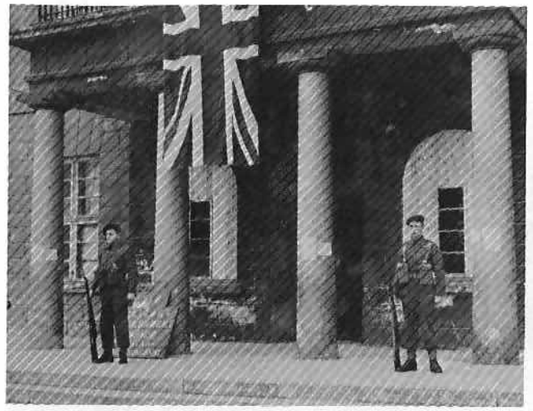
The Soviet force belonged to the 3rd Tank Corps of the Seventieth Army (Lieutenant-General V. S. Popov) of the 2nd Byelorussian Front of Marshal Konstantin Rokossovsky.

The Soviet officer with Crookenden was taken to the division commander, General Bols, who explained that, unless he received orders to the contrary, he would not allow the Russians to advance any further. The Soviet officer stated that his mission was to capture Lübeck. The discussion went on for a while until, finally, General Bols turned to one of the interpreters and said: 'Tell this bugger I have a complete airborne division and five regiments of guns. If he does not clear off, I will open fire.' At this, the Russian broke into a broad smile and backed down.

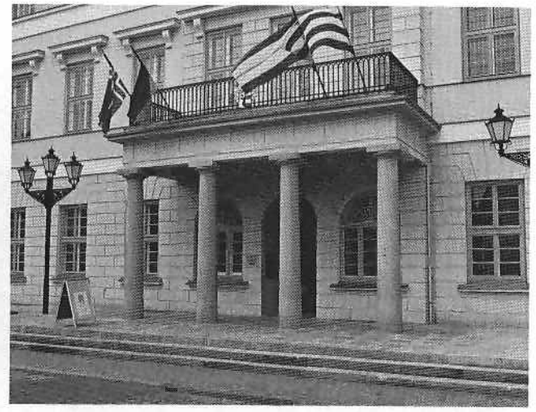
The 6th Airborne had dropped on D-Day and it was fitting that the first British unit to fight in Normandy should also be the first to link up with the Soviets. Together with the Scots Greys, the division could also claim to be the British unit to have penetrated deepest into Germany. That evening, Montgomery cabled to Field-Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff: 'There is no doubt that the very rapid movement from the Elbe to the Baltic was a very fine performance on the part of the troops concerned. There is also no doubt that we only just beat the Russians. . . . All well that ends well and the whole of the Schleswig peninsula is now effectively sealed off and we will keep it so.'

> *Two great armies, British and Russian have met. The Russians have set up a little wooden barrier across the road, they have got two smart guards mounted outside it, and around the barrier an international meeting is taking place. Everybody, the 6th Airborne, the boys who have made the junction has come out to see the Russians. The Russians have come out to see us. And around the barrier there has been a tremendous amount of handshaking and photographing, with the Russians posing as we photograph. There were some German prisoners trying desperately to get across the barrier. They got to the barrier and a Russian guard gave a wink to me and said 'Siberia'. And everybody, I must say, has no pity for them at all. One of the 6th Airborne said: 'It has been a long time but now it is here, and here we are with the Russians'. The Americans have driven up; the French prisoners-of-war have got down and are shaking hands; the Russians have handed over Russian cigarettes, in fact the armies, American, British and Russian, seem to be meeting around here in the heart of Germany in view of the Baltic sea. It's the end, the dead-end, of Hitler's Reich.*
>
> WYNFORD VAUGHAN-THOMAS,
> BBC BROADCAST, WISMAR, MAY 3, 1945

Left: **After the conference, the Soviet lieutenant-colonel and staff pose with Lieutenant Insole and party. (IWM)** *Right:* **Although the verandah is obviously different, the meeting house was probably what is today the Streec House restaurant at the suburb of Dargetzow, in 1945 the no man's land between the British and Soviet barrier on the Rostock road.**



Wismar's town hall on the main square had been severely damaged during the RAF attack on September 23/24, 1942.



Nevertheless, it could still be used and British Military Government set up its headquarters in the building.

The next day, May 3, there was 'considerable visiting' between 6th Airborne and Russian officers. General Bols met the Soviet army group commander, Marshal Rokossovsky. Several units sent delegations over to the Soviets to have a celebration. One such party, consisting of some 50 soldiers of 6th Airlanding Brigade and other units, was led by Major Todd Sweeney of the 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. The usual language barrier was even higher, as his and the Russian interpreter had to speak German to each other. As they stood around, 'tough-looking Russians with shaved heads' came up and started showing their collection of watches which they had high up their arms. The Russians had cleared out a number of houses and ordered German women to lay the table with linen table-cloths and glasses. At every table, both for the officers and the men, Britishers and Russians were seated alternately. After two or three hours of the inevitable toasts, everyone was pretty intoxicated. All the soldiers, Soviet and British, had their arms on each shoulders and were singing merrily. A few airborne troopers who started to kiss the Russian women, had to be whisked away lest they create trouble. Others were in such a state that they had to be taken back to billets on stretchers. As the Canadian war diary noted, the Russians 'proved to be the most persistent and thirsty drinkers we had ever met'. The morning after, one of the airborne division's brigadiers was 'found asleep in his car in a convenient but fortunately shallow ditch'.

Meanwhile, the 6th Airborne maintained its positions. The 195th Airlanding Field Ambulance set up a reception centre for refugees coming in from the east. Soviet troops were allowed to enter the city in small numbers but their armour remained on the outskirts. On May 5, the Soviets erected a road-block 100 yards from one of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion's barriers and moved up a troop of tanks to a position nearby. Two days later, British troops were no longer allowed to go into the Soviet zone. Relations between the two sides were markedly deteriorating, although high-level communication was maintained.

On May 7, Field-Marshal Montgomery flew to Wismar to meet Marshal Rokossovsky at the 'A Mess' of 6th Airborne Division HQ. They inspected a guard of honour formed by men of the 2nd Ox & Bucks. The 53rd (Worcestershire Yeomanry) Airlanding Light Regiment had lined up 75mm pack howitzer guns on an adjoining soccer field to fire a 19-gun welcoming salute. After that, Montgomery entertained Rokossovsky and some of his officers for lunch.

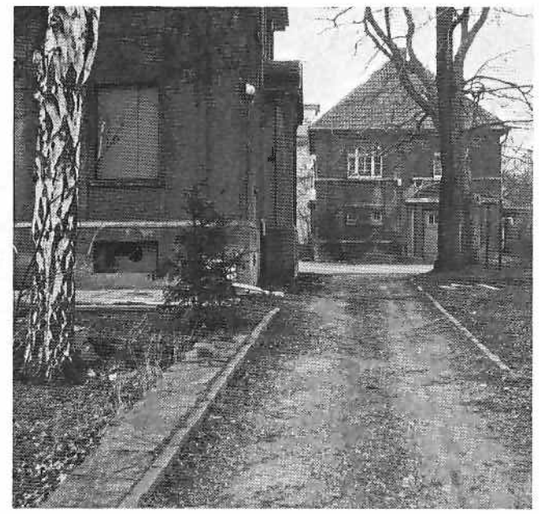
On May 7, Field-Marshal Montgomery and Marshal of the Soviet Union Rokossovsky met at Wismar. The meeting took place at the 'A Mess' of 6th Airborne Division HQ which was at No. 7 Dr-Unruh-Strasse. Here, the field-marshals take the salute from the 6th Airborne guard of honour. The division commander, General Eric Bols, stands on the right, next to the other members of the Soviet delegation. (IWM)

After inspecting the guard and then watching a 19-gun salute on the adjoining soccer field, the field-marshals and their parties posed with the commanders and staff of the 6th Airborne Division on the steps. Before the British had requisitioned the mansion, it had been the residence of the regional Nazi leader, the Kreisleiter, who had committed suicide in the building. (IWM)

On May 10, he paid a return visit to Rokossovsky's headquarters, about 20 miles inside the Soviet area. After an enormous feast, a Russian concert party entertained the hosts and guests for about an hour with songs and dancing.

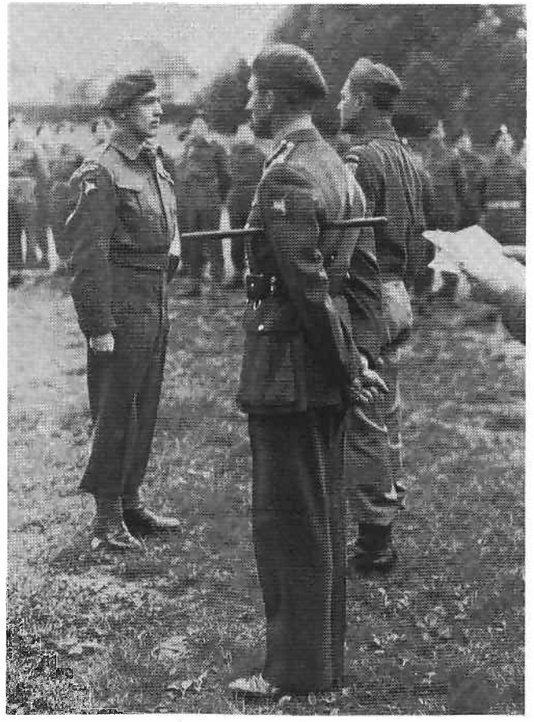
After the British withdrawal from Wismar, No. 7 Dr-Unruh-Strasse first served as school for children of the Soviet garrison. Then, in 1947, it became a quarters for nurses of the town hospital across the road, which it remained until 1990. Since then, it has stood empty and boarded up, the municipality only recently having found a buyer.

Montgomery: 'Rokossovsky was an imposing figure, tall, very good-looking, and well dressed; I understand he was a bachelor and much admired by the ladies.' According to the day's programme, the assembled photographers had exactly eight minutes (from 1112 to 1120) to take their pictures. The photo session over, Monty offered Rokossovsky a small lunch. The meeting between the austere tee-totaller Montgomery and the totally different Soviet marshal was cause for an amusing anecdote which has survived in different versions. As told by General Bols: 'I had been over to Rokossovsky's headquarters and had asked him to come to my headquarters on a reciprocal visit. I arranged it so that Monty would be present. Rokossovsky, who spoke beautiful French, arrived and met Monty and was offered a drink. Rokossovsky also smoked and he noticed that Monty was not drinking, so he inquired: "Are you not having anything to drink?" Monty looked up at this tall great cavalryman and said "I neither drink nor smoke". That seemed as if it would end the matter, but the Russian General continued "well, what do you do about women?" Monty failed to answer this inquiry — he decided to have a drink!' (IWM)



However, according to Montgomery in his *Memoirs*, the anecdote was in connection with his later visit to Rokossovsky's HQ and the circumstances somewhat different: 'The Russians were clearly anxious to make a good impression and they sent a special envoy to the HQ of the 6th Airborne Division at Wismar to find out what sort of entertainment I liked, and what were my tastes and habits. The envoy began by asking what sort of wine I preferred; he was told that I disliked wine, never drank any alcohol, and preferred water. He then said they proposed to produce some very fine cigars at lunch. Did I like cigars? He was told I did not smoke. By this time, he was somewhat shaken; but he had one more suggestion to make. They had some very fine women and dancing girls and they would produce these for the Field-Marshal. He was told that the Field-Marshal did not like women. That finished him and he exclaimed: "He doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, and doesn't like women. What the devil does he do all day?".' Here, Monty walks Rokossovsky and his delegation to their cars. (IWM)

In spite of the outward cordiality, Montgomery was suspicious of the Soviets' intentions and he was determined to keep a firm front facing east. Also, he was abhorred by the stories of the behaviour of Russian soldiers, especially against German women. However, according to the Yalta agreement, Wismar lay inside the Soviet zone of occupation. Detailed arrangements for the handover to the Soviets were made by the Allied Control Commission and, on July 1, the British forces evacuated the Wismar sector.



On May 20, in a ceremony on the soccer field adjoining the 6th Airborne Division HQ, Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser Eadie, whose 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion had won the race to Wismar,

received the Silver Star from Lieutenant-General Matthew B. Ridgway of the US XVIII Airborne Corps. General Bols in foreground. (C. Richer)